



Seizing our potential

Inspirational stories

of women from ethnic minority communities

SEIZING OUR POTENTIAL

Inspirational stories of women from
ethnic minority communities in Viet Nam.

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SEIZING OUR POTENTIAL

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In your hand you hold the book entitled '*Seizing our Potential*'. It was co-developed by UN Women and iSEE with a view to sharing the successfully implemented initiatives and interventions for gender mainstreaming and empowerment of ethnic minority women in Viet Nam.

The book captures the inspirational stories of 12 women from ethnic minority communities in Viet Nam. They shared their journeys of change in a simple, humble manner, but they are infused with powerful will and extraordinary inner strength as they dare to do things that not everyone dares.

Accompanying them on their journey are development organizations with different ways of working. However, they have one thing in common: a belief in the inner strength that is alive inside every human being. We hope that the stories told in this book will inspire organizations and individuals to galvanize initiatives and actions for gender equality and women's empowerment and above all, to sincerely listen to women's needs and aspirations so that they may truly become agents of changes for themselves and their communities.



INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY

A Pride-based approach

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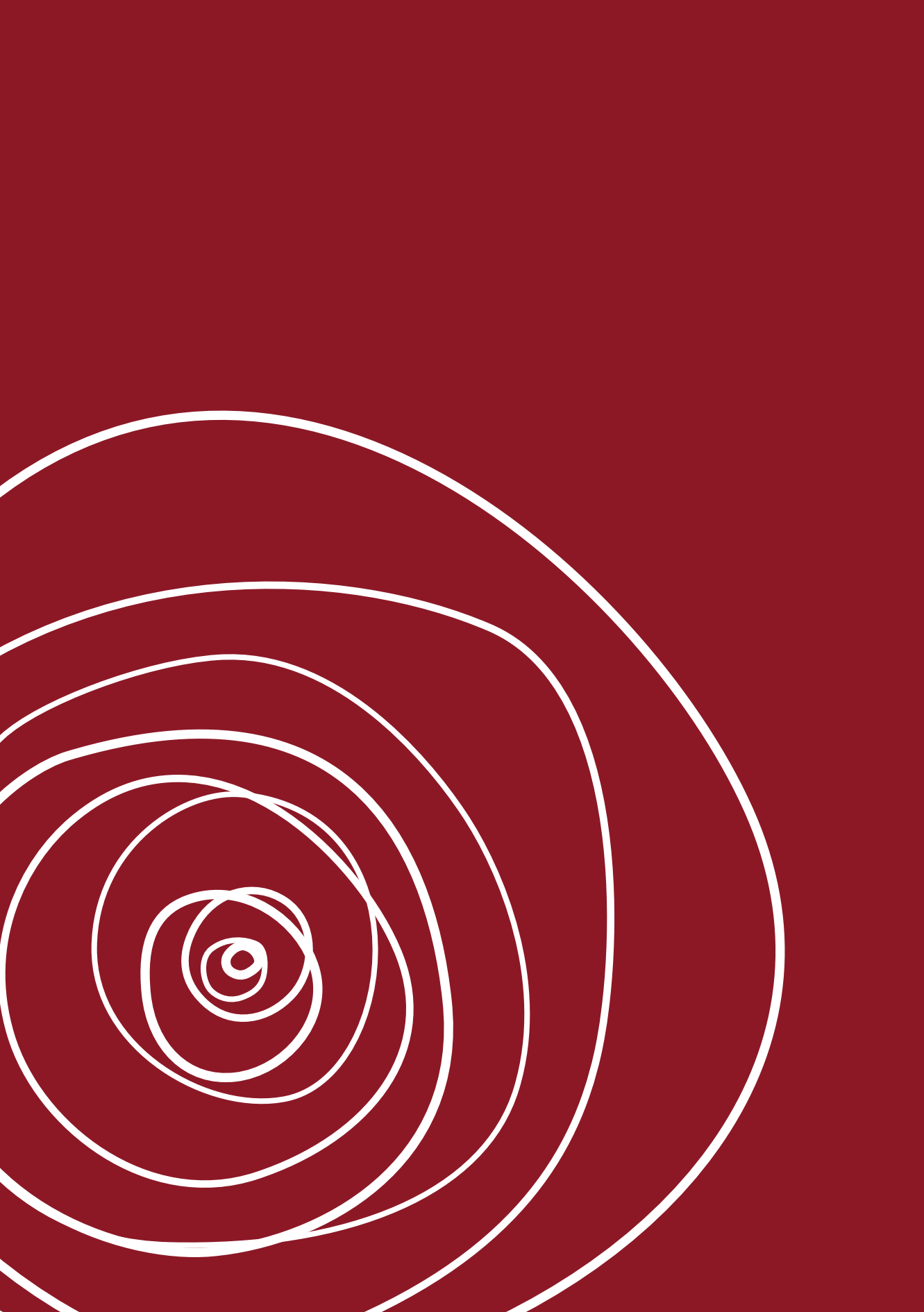
“Active agents” is among the basic principles in anthropological approaches. It refers to local people being active agents who possess the ability to resolve problems on their own. They are not passive receivers of what development projects bring. Agreeing to this anthropological principle means that officers who implement policies and development projects should only play the role of facilitators and should never consider themselves ‘more developed’ or more intelligent. In this way they can better assist local people in deciding what they need for themselves. In this approach, both officers and local people engage in a relationship of inter-subjectivity; together they discuss, co-learn, and find the most optimal solutions for the community. In this way, local people are able to use their knowledge, customs and cultural values in the designing, implementing and evaluating of projects.



Based on this basic principle, the ‘pride-based approach’ aims to help people determine their own lives. However, it is not easy for someone who thinks of himself or herself as poor and backwards to become someone who is confident and self-determined. With the motto: Pride – Confidence – Self-Determination, this approach is based on the belief that only when people are proud of their identity will they become confident and in control of their lives.

Interventions will focus on creating different spaces in which ethnic minority people can share, express themselves and exchange their indigenous knowledge on their cultures with other groups such as artists, agricultural experts, policy-makers, activists, and the entire community. People define themselves through their interactions with others; therefore, such spaces will also create opportunities for ethnic minority people to showcase their individual abilities, the special traits of their culture, and their indigenous knowledge, as well as to receive the respect and appreciation from other ethnicities. Through that, ethnic minority people take pride in their values, abilities and identity.

The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) and Center for Community Empowerment (CECEM) have been applying this approach in their work with the Tien Phong group – a network working for the voice of ethnic minority people – with over 50 members from 15 ethnic groups in different provinces across Viet Nam. The two organizations have worked side-by-side with Tien Phong in capacity building and empowerment to promote local innovative ideas, with the aim that Tien Phong becomes a network of and by the community. The annual event “I believe I can” organized by Tien Phong has been carried out since 2015 and is a prime example of a space in which different ethnicities come together to pay tribute to the cultural beauty and indigenous knowledge of different ethnicities. The general public, media and development partners hold this event in high regard because it promotes self-respect, confidence and encourages self-determination in ethnic minority people. In addition, Tien Phong has been active in mobilizing the community to resolve local issues and brings the voices of ethnic minority people into national and international forums and policy dialogues. It also advocates for more development policies that are appropriate for their communities.



STORY OF MS. XA

Hang Thi Xa

*Mong Ethnicity,
Ta Phin Commune, Sa Pa District,
Lao Cai Province*



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The way I think is: if you are carrying a heavy barrel and a person offers help because they see it's hard for you to carry it alone, they help you to carry the barrel through a difficult path. After getting such help, you should try to keep on carrying it further, and not just stop there.



(Above photo) Ms. Xa by the land which was planned to be an eco-tourism site

I have plans to establish a cultural tourism site here, featuring bungalows, restaurants, a performance area and a complete experience of Mong culture. There is an art performance group, they wear Mong costumes, blow pan-pipes (Khen), and sing typical Mong songs. They pound rice and grind maize to make “men men” (a Mong dish made from maize, which is minced and then steamed), and they weave cloth, etc. Visitors will be able to try weaving or preparing “men men.”

I went everywhere to see how others did cultural tourism. I went to Ta Van, Topas and Cach Cach. I wanted to go to Son La but I didn't have the money, so I went to Sa Pa instead. I wanted to see what their ideas for establishing an ecotourism site are. I discovered that everywhere I went, ethnicity is just a pretext for them. They just put things on display, but the things are not 100% of their ethnicity. The loom is just displayed but it does not work; you can't weave any cloth. An Indigo barrel is just put there, but no dyeing is done.



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What is special about my cultural site is that there will be 100% ethnic costumes and 100% ethnic songs.

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Establishing a Mong cultural tourism site also aims to preserve our ethnic identity, so I'm trying to do it more correctly, in more detail. What is special about my cultural site is that there will be 100% ethnic costumes and 100% ethnic songs. I will follow exactly the way Mong people weave, not only displaying, but also doing real weaving. When guests stay at our homestay, they will experience many things.



(Left photos) Ms. Xa sat by the spinning machine and weaving frame.



(Right photo) Group of women weaving brocade fabric of Mong people was established by Ms. Xa.

⁽¹⁾ Activity to support local initiatives to mobilize the community to address their own problems, under the project. “I believe I can” by iSEE and CECEM in collaboration with Tien Phong Network funded by Irish Aid.

“

In the past, I thought that I worked to support the basic needs of my family, but since I've been to different places, I understand that it is also for my culture; who else can introduce and maintain it better than I do?

In the past, I thought that I worked to support the basic needs of my family, but since I've been to different places, I understand that it is also for my culture; who else can introduce and maintain it better than I do? What I do will not only be beneficial to myself but also to the whole community. If people don't pay attention to preserving our culture, it will soon be forgotten. The most important thing is that our culture doesn't fall into oblivion. Every Mong girl must know how to weave brocade.

What I like most about joining Tien Phong, an approach that encourages the community to think and act in new ways, is that everyone always keeps their local culture in mind. There is a wide range of ethnicities and each person contributes their own opinions. I get many ideas and plenty of information, which I like very much – and I can consolidate those ideas when I get home.

In 2016, the project¹ supported me with 20 million VND to buy a spinning machine, looms, beeswax, and moulds. I made another machine and then I formed a group of women to weave fabrics and brocade. In 2018, the project supported us with an additional 14 million VND to buy seeds and fertilizers to cultivate linseeds. I contributed land and plows and asked other women to cultivate linseeds, collect flax, and make fibers. This year, I preserved seeds for cultivation next year.





(Above photo) Ms. Xa on the rock pile which are prepared to build eco-tourism area.

⁽¹⁾ A Facebook-like Vietnamese social media platform

After getting some funding support, I kept thinking that one cannot just wait for financial support to carry on doing things and then immediately stop when they no longer receive financial support. If you only think about money, the project will only be strong when it is being funded, but when the funding is over, it is like an abandoned house, which is unfair.

The way I think is: if you are carrying a heavy barrel, and a person offers help because they see it's hard for you to carry it alone, they help you to carry the barrel through a difficult path. After getting such help, you should try to keep on carrying it further, and not just stop there.

To realize the cultural tourism project, I must invest around 3 billion VND. If I don't have enough funds, I will borrow from the bank. The other day, I found an announcement on Facebook and Zalo¹ that said the district would hold a training on how to create a homestay business. I went even though I was not invited. After that, I learned about fire prevention and fire fighting for another two days. They did not invite me, but I still attended. Previously, I participated only when they invited me.



(Above photo) Ms. Xa and her husband

Not many women dare to do what I do. Once I had a toothache, I told them to keep doing their work and I went away for a while. After I came back from Sa Pa a day later, they had not done any work. They only work when I'm there and work with them.

Many Mong women are unsure of their capabilities and don't think that the community will help. Mong men say: "Oh dear, if women can do it, I must be daydreaming. Only men can do it" or they say, "Women talk nonsense, what men say makes more sense."

Someone said that to me and I replied: "Everyone has rights, do not say that! Let's allow women do whatever they are capable of." My husband is not like that, he just asked, "You are doing a big job. Are you sure you can do it?" I responded, "Take it easy! I'm thinking. You'd better not yell at me so that I can focus on thinking. Quarreling only makes my head think of annoying things." And then he comforted me, "If you can do it, I'll help you."

I know if too many things are going on in your head, you'll become confused. Each person should concentrate on one thing. I asked for more people to join me. Then I invited trainers to teach them how to weave and sing. I sent two women for a training on how to be a master/mistress of ceremony (MC) for Mong art performance programmes so that they can present in both English and Vietnamese.

Ms. Ly Thi Tung is good at singing Mong songs and drawing using beeswax. She's also very good at stitching ethnic clothes very beautifully. Ms. Tung will support these activities at my ecotourism site.

Ms. Mai Thi Say knits, boils threads, and threads yarn on looms very professionally. Normally, since she was little, she has only worked for her own family business. However, if she collaborates with me, she will teach her profession to the community.



I plan to employ around 30 villagers to work for me. We will work together and uphold our culture.



(Right images) Ms. Xa met Ms. Tung and Ms. Say to discuss the works



STORY OF MS. KIEU

Ly Thi Hong Kieu

*Khmer ethnicity,
Tam Phuoc village, Dai Tam commune,
My Xuyen district, Soc Trang Province*



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Every time I bring a performance or a piece of Khmer culture with me to Hanoi, I am happy and proud that our culture is better known.



(Left photos) Ms. Kieu took pictures of Khmer heritages



⁽¹⁾With the desire to evoke and strengthen the pride of ethnic minority culture, while creating opportunities for ordinary people to directly learn and preserve cultural values, Photovoice programs – Storytelling by images organized by iSEE, CARE and Oxfam in 5 provinces (Yen Bai, Lao Cai, Thanh Hoa, Quang Tri and Soc Trang) from December 2011 to April 2012. The project equipped cameras and basic knowledge of cultural diversity for 64 representatives from 9 different ethnic communities, so that they can record cultural practices and express their community's dreams.

One day in 2012, the village head asked me to attend a meeting where many participants had misguided perceptions of ethnic minorities. People thought we were not good at business, that we had many festivals and that we were dependent on the support of others, and as a result, we were poor. This is the reason I voluntarily participate in events where pictures are taken to make my ethnicity better known to others, without receiving any money. After I register at an event, I feel nervous because I do not speak Vietnamese very well and am quite busy looking after my young children. A friend of mine once said, “You are not young anymore, how can you go out to take photos?” But I answered, “This is something I can do. It is good to take photos of real life.”



I voluntarily participate in events where pictures are taken to make my ethnicity better known to others, without receiving any money.

I still remember my fear of flying when I went to Hanoi to attend the exhibition of PhotoVoice¹, a project in which photos are taken to tell stories about the cultural practices of ethnicities. When the plane was about to take off, I said to my companion, “Could you tell them to stop the airplane and let me get off?” He answered, “Are you crazy?” I imitated other people and put some cotton balls in my ears. Every time when the plane went up or down, it scared me to death.



In 2014, the Tien Phong group was formed to promote the culture of different ethnicities from various provinces. Tien Phong is an approach that encourages the community to think and act in new ways.

When I first heard about the group, I did not know what to expect. Later, I understood that it was a group with members acting on behalf of their ethnic community. I thought, “If I participate in that group, how will it benefit my ethnicity? If I don’t do anything meaningful, it will be of no use.”



(Left photos) The Khmer performances “I believe I can” events organized in Hanoi.

(Right photo) Ms. Kieu talked to the monk to learn about her culture.



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I did not sing nor dance, but since I joined the Tien Phong group I do.

In 2015, the Tien Phong group organized the first event named “I believe I can.” I discussed introducing the Khmer wedding ritual of breaking the fence to enter the bride’s house with other group members - it is a simple ritual, but very meaningful to the Khmer.

In the following years, I often went to Hanoi and brought a new piece of Khmer culture with me. One year, I went to a pagoda and talked to a monk who told me about the “Xi Dam” dance team. That evening, it rained very hard but my husband drove me to each dance team members’ house so I could invite them to participate in a performance. It took quite a while to persuade them; some of them did not have an ID card to get on the airplane, or were afraid of flying. The performance was eventually very successful. It was part of the opening ceremony and the dancers were invited to march around the pedestrian zone of Hoan Kiem Lake.

Every time I bring a performance or a piece of Khmer culture to Hanoi, I am happy and proud that our culture is better known.



When I have a camera with me and I take photos, I learn more about our culture. In the past, I neither knew nor explored it. Now I ask local people about everything: symbols of the animals in pagodas, the hair cut ritual performed by descendants to repay the grandparents and more. When I was young, I used to be shy. Now I am confident dancing everywhere. Now that I am involved in the project, I have to make an effort. If we believe in ourselves, we can do it.



(Left photo) Ms. Kieu consulted local households who received cattles in Program No. 135.

(Right photo) Ms. Kieu discussed with local residents about the plan to build the local lane.

After taking part in training courses, I also know I have rights that are protected. For example, when the government constructs roads, I have the right to supervise how much construction materials (e.g. bricks, cement, etc.) are used. Previously I did not know that, I was even scared whenever I saw the police. Many elderly people in the village are also afraid when they see officials.

In the past, I seldom attended meetings. Since I joined the Tien Phong group, I became more extroverted. I actively ask for information about meetings so I can register to attend. I tell other peers: "If there is something we do not know, listen to the experienced people. We may not understand 100% of what they say, but at least we can understand 50%, and we can ask for clarification.

When the Tien Phong group conducted an independent evaluation of the National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction, my team was in charge of evaluating the Programme No. 135 on cow provision to households. We asked beneficiary households about the benefits and difficulties, contributed to the evaluation report and proposed necessary adjustments.

Another change I noticed is that households in my alley contributed their own money to get a local lane constructed. Each household contributed 300,000 - 500,000 VND, depending on their circumstances. The pagoda also contributed 20 packs of cement. As for the labour force, my children mixed concrete while members of other households cleaned the lane. After the construction was complete, all the households in the alley jointly organized a ritual. All related expenditures were documented properly and transparently.



The biggest change for me is that now I am more willing to talk. I raise my voice immediately whenever I find something wrong. I also ask more questions about things I want to learn, unlike in the old days when I tended to follow others.

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I am proud to introduce the identity of my ethnicity to everyone and to connect people. Now, I am more self-confident and in control of my own life.



STORY OF MS. THANH

Vy Thi Thanh

*Thai ethnicity,
Dak Rmang commune, Dak Glong district,
Dak Nong province*



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In the past I did not dare to do anything, worrying about failure all the time. Now I know that once I have an idea, I should do it, and if I fail, I should try to do it again until I am successful instead of just dropping out.



In 2007, my family moved here. When I first arrived, I was not very confident and felt I was powerless and no one would listen to me when I talked. I was different from those who were born and raised here – from the house I live in, to the plants I grow, or the animals I raise. I started a completely different life, with a different climate and land; everything was new. I had never grown coffee plants before and didn't know anything about it.

In the past when I seldom left my village, I felt so nervous whenever I met people in high positions (e.g. directors); I did not think I could go and talk to them. When it comes to communicating and negotiating in business, ethnic minority women are often thought to be below men and only men have the right to make decisions, from leading the household's economic activities, to signing of contracts and everything else in the family. Women were usually housewives and their main task was to give birth.



³⁾ A project to increase the social status of ethnic minority people in Dak Glong district (Dak Nong province) has been implemented by Oxfam, CECEM, the Agriculture Department, and the Farmers' Union of Dak Glong district to promote joint action and a sense of pride, self-confidence and ownership through the model of teamwork.

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Learning about human rights and gender equality, I no longer felt insecure as my family, there was no longer discrimination between men and women.

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In 2012, I joined an economic development team³, and then I joined Tien Phong – an approach that encourages the community to think and act in new ways. In addition to participating in field visits to study economic models, I also learned about human rights and gender equality. I no longer felt insecure. In my family, there was no longer discrimination between men and women. We realized that men and women are equal, both can take the lead, make decisions, discuss and plan things together. In my family, I am in charge of economic activities while my husband is responsible for housework and farming work.

Now that I know my rights, I make my own decisions and take the initiative in all aspects of my life, in my family, in groups of which I am a member and in the community. Previously, I did not even dare to meet commune officials, but now I can even go to other provinces to meet people, to find business partners to exchange goods and negotiate. I also raise my voice when I see something unreasonable or unfair. For example, as part of a poverty reduction project, a cattle value chain was developed in which local beneficiaries were provided with cows and some financial support to build cowsheds. However, the beneficiary households were not given money directly to build cowsheds corresponding to their needs. Instead, project staff went out to buy the construction materials (e.g. bricks, sand, etc.) themselves and at higher prices. I wasn't a beneficiary of the project, but I felt it was not acceptable. I raised my voice and requested that the project let local people make decisions about their own cowsheds.

Being a member of Tien Phong group, I also learn about broader, local issues and have had opportunities to take part in seminars and forums on indigenous knowledge, organic agriculture, cultural preservation and more. I share the knowledge of my ethnicity, my successes, and my failures.

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I also raise my voice when I see something unreasonable or unfair.

(Below photo) Ms. Thanh participated in a forum on indigenous knowledge held in Hanoi.







After over 10 years to explore and adjust, I find that being hardworking is not quite enough to work in agriculture. It also requires observation, research and innovation.



(Above photo) Ms. Thanh in her pepper and coffee garden.

After over 10 years to explore and adjust, I find that being hardworking is not quite enough to work in agriculture. It also requires observation, research and innovation. If we know that we are doing something incorrectly yet still continue to do it in the same manner, we will just end up with more failure.

In my coffee garden, a couple of times a year I had to spray insecticide to kill mealy bugs. However, they would return quickly afterwards and even in greater quantity. I kept spraying pesticide, which cost a lot of money and effort, damaged my health and polluted the environment. Then, I started raising ants. Ants make their nests on the trees and like eating bugs including mealy bugs. When the colony of ants is over developed, we can spray [insecticide] and they all will disappear. Over the last three years, I do not have to use any pesticide in my coffee garden anymore - thanks to the ants.

There is also a piece of barren land where I now grow black pepper. I improved the land quality by planting wild pinto peanut between pepper lots. They grow very fast and help to prevent soil erosion and drift in the rainy season, maintain soil moisture in the dry season, and provide natural protein for the soil. When the wild pinto peanut plant grows high, I use a machine to cut it and let it decompose into fertilizer. That area of land is now fertile with many worms, and the worm castings are good for the soil. It is indeed a cycle.

“

This year I did not buy any chemical fertilizer; I composted chicken manure with rice husks to make fertilizer.



(Above photo) Chicken farm of Ms. Thanh's family.

Recently I tried raising chickens. I use honey locust smokes to treat wheezing chickens and ground garlic mixed with water to feed chickens to treat avian influenza and diarrhea. I also collaborate with organic vegetable farming groups where I collect their discarded vegetables as feed for chickens and give them chicken manure to use as fertilizer for their vegetables. I also plant banana plants, which give me fruit to sell and I use the trunks as fiber to feed the chickens. In addition, I plant pennisetum purpurrerum (a type of fountain grass) whose sprouts can be used to feed hens to lay better quality eggs.

At work I used to be exposed to a wide range of chemicals - chemical fertilizers, pesticides and growth hormones. I realized that my health was being affected. I was the one to assist my husband to spray insecticides and I usually felt tired for several days after the spray. So, I decided to do organic farming, raising chickens and using their manure as fertilizer for coffee trees, pepper, durian and avocado trees, and so on. This year I did not buy any chemical fertilizer; I composted chicken manure with rice husks to make fertilizer. Organic fertilizer is very sustainable; if we use this fertilizer for plants this year, the plants will start sprouting beautifully from the year after. This year I have been able to save up to 100 million VND by not purchasing chemical fertilizers.



Since I started raising chickens for economic reasons instead of for feeding the family, I have tried dozens of different breeds of chicken. At one point, I went to a training course in another district to study poultry breeding techniques where I learned that in Dak R'Lap district there was a farm breeding various types of special chickens, and so I paid them a visit. It was the first time I had heard of the Quy Phi (Royal) chicken breed: they come from the UK and resemble a bird; they can fly high and stay in trees so they are not affected by wind or rain. They are highly resistant and their meat is of good quality. I wanted to do something different, so I decided to invest in Quy Phi chicken.

I want to collaborate with other households who also raise Quy Phi chickens. If 20 households collaborate with one another, each does not need to raise a lot, but just enough to always have chickens to sell and there will be no interruption to our business. Many people have the ability to raise several hundred chickens; such a small quantity will help keep the coops clean, making it easier to prevent diseases among the chickens. I can provide chicken breeds for the group, give guidance on how to feed the chickens, use vaccines for disease prevention, ensure hygiene, clean coops, and find customers - thus creating a sustainable supply chain.

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I can provide chicken breeds for the group, give guidance on how to feed the chickens, use vaccines for disease prevention, ensure hygiene, clean coops, and find customers - thus creating a sustainable supply chain.



“

Although my family may have only achieved small things, I do not want to be successful alone; I want everyone in the community to be successful.

In the past, I did not dare to do anything, worrying about failure all the time. Now, I know that once I have an idea, I should do it, and if I fail, I should try to do it again until I am successful instead of just dropping out. Although my family may have only achieved small things, I do not want to be successful alone; I want everyone in the community to be successful. I am raising chickens, there might be failed trials, but I want to share the lessons learned with others to make them have less risk so we can grow together.







STORY OF MS. THUY

Truong Thi Thuy

*Muong ethnicity,
Luong Ngoai commune, Ba Thuoc district,
Thanh Hoa province*



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Daring to do things is important. It means we are not afraid, we know we are doing the right thing for the benefit of the people. If we are not curious and do not dare to do things, we cannot participate.



(Above photo) Ms. Thuy in one of Tien Phong group's activities.

I started participating in community activities in 2007. The first programme was the Watershed Management Initiative funded by CARE. At that time, my main task was to be the focal point connecting with villagers who would provide information for the project.

Local people trusted me and wanted to elect me as a member of the Women's Union. But my husband said our economic situation was not yet stable and for that reason, other people would not listen to me and my work would not benefit local people. Having said that, he effectively stopped me from participating in the Women's Union.

When the CARE-funded Watershed Management project started in Ba Thuoc district (Thanh Hoa province), it took me a while to figure out an explanation for my husband. I said, "Well, you didn't let me join the government's social work network, so let me participate in a non-governmental initiative." My husband agreed.



“

Once we said something, we would have to follow through with it; we cannot say things that we will not do.

I still remember the election day of the Commune People's Council in 2011. At that time, the nominees had to write their own plan of action and present it. I did not know what to write, so I just remained silent and listened to other people's presentations. I understood that once we said something, we would have to follow through with it; we cannot say things that we will not do. When it was my turn, I said to people that I had not previously engaged in any public work and I had no idea what I should do, but I would listen to local people through daily talks and try to convey their messages to relevant authorities for proper handling. That year, I was the only villager who had not previously held any official position to be elected Deputy to the Commune People's Council.



Participating in social activities has helped me a lot in my work as a Commune People's Council Deputy. The Council holds two meetings a year to collect constituents' opinions. However, I think meetings are not the only platform where we can collect opinions, so in daily life I often ask people if they have any problems or difficulties.

When I engage in projects with different organizations, I discover more issues as I become more experienced and learn from people from other localities. When I am in the field, I know how to talk to people and what to observe. I also have the opportunity to bring local observations to the Committee for Ethnic Affairs or to other central ministries.



When I engage in projects with different organizations, I discover more issues as I become more experienced and learn from people from other localities.

(Left photos) Ms. Thuy interviewed local residents about the implementation of policies at local level.

All my social activities have originated from my curiosity. Back in 2012, we had to select which groups would participate in PhotoVoice – an initiative on story telling through photos. I was so curious even though I didn't know what PhotoVoice was or why people even had to take photos. I also liked to learn more about Muong culture in Thanh Hoa province. Thus I became determined to participate in the project. At that time, six people were selected to join the project, but five of them quit, which left me alone. Still, I was determined to try.

After joining the PhotoVoice project, I got used to going around, taking pictures and talking with people. I'm now more proud of my culture and want to preserve it.



(Left photo) Ms. Thuy as the MC in “I believe I can” event

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Upon completing the training, I was asked if I would like to do some research. I said YES immediately.

In 2014, the Tien Phong group was founded and I was one of its first members. Tien Phong is an approach that encourages the community to think and act in new ways.

The most impressive memory for me is the first time our group organized the event ‘I believe I can’ in Sapa in 2015. Before that, we attended in this type of event several times as invitees, but this time we had to discuss how to organize the event ourselves.

I did not know anything about the organization and division of work for an event. Our group members said, “Let’s do it together as if we were organizing a wedding.” Each of us had our own tasks and helped one another. Although everyone was in different places and the communication was not convenient, the whole group was very enthusiastic. The event was a great success and everyone was proud of their contribution. It was the first time I felt that we were mutually responsible as a group.



In 2017, I participated in a training course on gender responsive budgeting organized by UN Women. I learned that in other countries, public services are monitored and evaluated by the people, not just by officials. I was so excited about the fact that the public can also be involved in the policy process. Upon completing the training, I was asked if I would like to do some research. I said yes immediately.

On many occasions, people in Luong Ngoai commune have filed complaints about the quality of local public health services through official and unofficial channels. I have been a Deputy to the Commune People's Council for two terms, and I have heard such complaints repeatedly in the meetings, but there has been no improvement. With this gender responsive budgeting activity, I chose this topic for further research.

Our team has four members. Within one month, we conducted 121 interviews. The interviews were carried out the same way we collected votes for deputies to the People's Council. The only difference is that we had a well-prepared questionnaire. It was quite interesting to learn that most interviewees went to the health station in a neighboring commune for health care, as the quality of service was better there. Two of my team members decided to act as patients and went to that commune health station to assess the situation.

After our situational assessment and completion of the report, the team decided to organize a sharing session with local people so our report could be heard by everyone. Since then, health services in my commune have improved quite a lot. Local people are more satisfied.



(Above photo) The members of Tien Phong group in Thanh Hoa met to discuss business.

Now, the Tien Phong group (Thanh Hoa province) has seven members. When we recruit new members, I ask them one question: “Do you dare to do things?” I think daring to do things is important. It means we are not afraid and we know we are doing the right thing for the benefit of the people. If we are not curious and do not dare to do things, we cannot participate.

When we interviewed people about gender responsive budgets, many people were afraid that what they said would have a negative impact on their lives. The team members and myself had to explain a lot. Initially, when we went to the Commune People’s Committee to propose research activities, some officials were also reluctant. But we tried to convince them and said it from our heart, so they were reassured.

Currently, there are a number of problems in our district. The road that was constructed with funding from the Poverty Reduction Project (Project No. 135) has been severely damaged, negatively affecting people’s lives. In addition, with the recent heavy rain, many houses have been flooded due to a sudden flash flood from hydropower plants.

Every evening, the Tien Phong group members discuss the existing problems; we want to do something to improve the situation. Some local people see that we often do activities that are useful to them so now they like to engage. People trust us.



(Above photo) The team were on the way to monitor the quality of the road in the commune supported by the Poverty Reduction Project.

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What I am most proud of with the Tien Phong group (Thanh Hoa province) is that we dare to do things and try things.

What I am most proud of with the Tien Phong group (Thanh Hoa province) is that we dare to do things and try things. I do not think the old members have the right to command or direct new members to do anything. We respect diversity; all opinions are listened to. The young members in my group are dozens of years younger than me, but I treat them as friends. I have been active for a long time, but now I should step back so that the young ones can have an opportunity to fulfill their potential.



INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY

Co-research

WITH SUPPORT OF



WHAT IS “CO-RESEARCH”?

In traditional research, local people often play a role that is rather passive and dependent on the researcher(s). They are usually only responsible for providing information and following the requests of the researcher(s) without any role in the analysis or how the data is used. In this approach, the researcher(s) analyse and present the information through their own lenses to the general public, academics, media or policymakers.

In an effort to promote the position of local people and equality between researcher(s) and members of the community, a new approach in research has been born. This approach is known by many names, including, participatory research, community-based participatory research, participatory action research, and co-research. Based on desk reviews and discussions with experts in academia and the development sector, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) decided to use “collaborative research, co-research” in order to uphold the spirit of equality in the empowerment of, and collaboration with, local people.



As a result of its aim to promote local people's participation and eliminate unequal relationships, collaborative research by is commonly regarded as a 'genuinely democratic' approach in research (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991:5). The creation of knowledge in a democratic manner is a stable foundation for interventions and policies, bringing optimal benefits to local people. By collaborating with local people, the interactions, sharing and coordinated work not only optimize resources (ideas, knowledge, facilities, technologies), but also create capacity building opportunities for participants. Consequently, this is a methodology that is potentially suitable in both the academic and development fields.

iSEE has been a pioneer in the researching, piloting and application of this methodology in Vietnam since 2013. A few notable projects include:

- **2013 – 2014:** iSEE carried out co-research with the community in Sa Pa, Dak Lak on such topics as: teaching and learning of the Mong language, teaching and learning of the Ede language and taking care of cattle during the cold season;
- **2015:** the Mong community in Sa Pa carried out a research on the trafficking of women across the border;
- **2015 – 2017:** co-research with ethnic minority women (Tay, Dao, Mong) in Bac Kan on such topics as: raising local/indigenous pigs, waste management, drop-out rates among children, constructing a community house, preserving Tay – Dao culture;
- **2017 – 2018:** co-research with ethnic minority women (Khmer) in Tra Vinh on such topics as: pollution, safe farming of vegetables (note: safe in the sense of food safety/hygiene), raising chicken using organic bedding.
- **2018 – present:** co-research with ethnic minority youth (Muong people) in Hoa Binh on: employment opportunities, career orientation and migrant workers.



STEPS TO CO-RESEARCH

Co-research methodology focuses on the collaboration between the external researcher(s) and local people from the community. This is a process in which local researcher(s) (local people) and external researcher(s) (facilitators) seek to understand and learn from each other. The research group will present and discuss the findings of the research with other local people in order to seek recommendations and innovative ideas to resolve issues. In addition, local researchers will advocate to local authorities and social organizations to jointly implement proposed resolutions with the local community. The three pillars of this methodology are:

- **Research**
- **Capacity building**
- **Action**

Throughout the process of reading through materials and implementation, iSEE has developed an implementation framework for the co-research methodology based on real-life experience. This process consists of 10 steps, subject to change or adaptation in accordance with specific projects.

CO-RESEARCH PROCESS

1. Establish a local research team on a voluntary basis and selected by the community. The research approach is introduced to local researcher(s) through trainings so that they understand the importance of local people's voices and their role in bringing those voices to the general public and policy-makers. The principle of equal status and roles between the local and external researcher(s) throughout the entire research process is emphasized.
2. General research on issue-areas of the community by different means and methods (PRA, photovoice, etc.) Researchers are instructed to use and apply visual tools to sketch a general overview of economic, cultural and social issues in their own community and to identify highlighted issue-areas at the local level.
3. Self-identify the research topic: After identifying highlighted issue-areas at the local level, the community research team discusses and chooses a topic that they and other villagers deem important and most urgent to carry out more in-depth research.



4. Jointly choose and develop the research tool. External researcher(s) and local researcher(s) discuss building appropriate research tools (surveys, Venn diagrams, maps, observation questionnaires, etc.)
5. Create research workplan (choosing informants, ways to use research tools, assigning tasks, timing): External researcher(s) suggest criteria for informants and ways to collect information. Local researcher(s) propose a list of informants based on agreed upon criteria in order to create a fitting workplan.
6. Carry out research: both external and local researchers collect information based on the workplan and record the information.
7. Analyse data: After a research phase, the entire research team synthesizes, analyses and rearranges the findings of the research together, simultaneously identifying aspects that require deeper understanding. The team continues surveying or interviewing until the issues are clarified.
8. Present research findings through appropriate means (film, photographs, broadcasting, documents, etc.): External and local researchers decide the means of presenting and arranging research findings in different structures to bring into the report. In the report, researchers clarify specific recommendations serving to resolve research question(s).
9. Share research findings at the central and local level: External and local researchers present research findings together at forums and conferences at different levels.
10. Follow-up action post-research: The community implements innovative ideas and findings from the research.



STORY OF MS. XINH

Sam Thi Xinh

*Mong Ethnicity,
Phuc Loc Commune, Ba Be District,
Bac Kan Province*



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I'm very glad when I, myself, not other people from outside the community, can explore the issues of my own community. I now have opportunities to speak up and what I say is evidence-based, like a Vietnamese saying "Tell it like there are books and evidence for it"



Previously, there were four siblings in my family: my eldest sister, my two elder brothers, and me as the youngest child, but one of my brothers passed away. Before, my house was on the hill. We moved to this land in 2008. When I started school, there was no kindergarten. I went to school from the first grade to fourth grade here and later had to travel to the commune centre from the fifth grade onwards. In general, there, the Mong people and the Dao people hang out together, while Tay people do not hang out with the Dao or Mong friends. They say that the Mong and the Dao people are slow in their studies and not hygienic in daily life, so they don't like to be friends with us. It made me sad but since I still had many other friends, why should I care about making friends with them or not?

After I finished the fifth grade, my dad explored the opportunities and sent an application to enroll me in a district boarding school. However, my mum preferred me to stay near her and not go to the boarding school so far away from home as I was still very young. If I studied at a boarding school, one option was for me to stay there during the week and then go home on weekends when my dad came to pick me up. Otherwise, I could stay there until the Tet holiday and not return home for several months. That was why my mum was worried. Finally, she agreed on one condition, that my father arrange to send an application for my best friend Doan. She went with me to the boarding school, which reassured my mum about my further studies there.



(Above photo) Ms. Xinh carefully preserved the certificates and obtained during her studies.

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I told her, “I will try my best to complete the ninth grade because we already receive support for my studies, lodging and meals at the boarding school.”

When we were new to the boarding school, we missed our homes so much. We held each other and cried every weekend. There were two friends who were of Tay ethnicity in Muong Khuong, who both missed their homes and were scared of ghosts. Doan and I were stronger, so we often comforted them.

In the middle of the seventh grade, my dad passed away. My relatives and neighbours advised my mother to not let me study any further because they assumed it was pointless for a girl to study a lot. What was more, after my dad’s death, my mum could not afford my tuition fees or cost of living. My mother let me decide whether I should continue with my studies or not. I told her, “I will try my best to complete the ninth grade because we already receive support for my studies, lodging and meals at the boarding school.”



After finishing the ninth grade, I once again asked for my mum's permission to take exams for the Bac Kan boarding school, because there I would continue to enjoy support for accommodation and food. However, the school enrolls students according to their exam results, just like the university entrance exam [top-down] and not according to a review of their general academic results. I applied for the exams and studied for them on my own in Bac Kan. My motivation was very high because if I failed to enter a boarding school, I would not be able to continue with my studies because I could not afford the lodging and tuition fees at other schools. I studied hard for the exams and luckily, in the end I passed, so I was able to continue my high school studies.

At this high school, it was not as much fun as when I was at the secondary school because there were some classmates who kind of did not like having a friend like me – from an ethnic minority background, or coming from a poor household. I had some friends with similar situations, for example, when we needed to pay some amount of money, we were always worried about how to ask for it from our family via phone. The others scowled in contempt, as if we were pretending to be worried, but in fact we were really worried. For them, it was a small amount of money, enough for several sweets, cakes or canned goods, but for me it was a big sum of money.

At the time, I was quite frugal because I thought all I needed was to focus on learning. I got a monthly allowance for soap but I did not spend much of it. I saved it instead and whenever my brother came to visit me, I sent several hundred thousand VND to my mum and felt very happy. Sometimes I felt self-pity, like during occasions such as teacher-parent meetings or Tet holidays when my friends in the dorm room opposite mine looked forward to their parents who were coming to visit; fathers or mothers with some sweets, cookies or some warm clothes or other stuff for winter. But I hardly had those things, my mum could not ride a motorbike or car as she got car sick and she also did not know the way to get to my school.



I got a monthly allowance for soap but I did not spend much of it. I saved it instead and whenever my brother came to visit me, I sent several hundred thousand VND to my mum and felt very happy.

(Left photo) The road from Ms. Xinh to her boarding school.



(Above photo) Ms. Xinh and other members discussed the research's subjects.



I produced the results and showed them to my fellow community members.

At the end of 2015, I started taking part in the co-research method. When one hears the term “research,” one feels that only highly educated people can do it. But, when I followed this method, I found it easy. It was different from previous research when researchers came from cities and just asked questions. In the co-research, we did it ourselves. We explored ourselves and it helped us understand how to understand an issue and we became more confident as we became equipped with more skills.

The status for this co-research is also different. I am a girl in my community and I explored issues in my own community. I produced the results and showed them to my fellow community members. During previous research, researchers came and sent reports to people in the community, but some could not read the reports. When we did the research ourselves, we could speak straight away to people in the community. So I only needed to brief them on the key ideas, results, and ways of solving problems.



(Above photo) Ms. Xinh shared the research results with the local authority and residents.



The issue may still persist, and we may not solve all the problems at the same time or right away, but I think we will solve them gradually, step-by-step. I also can contribute my small part to it.

When the research findings were shared with local authorities and the media, I felt very excited. I'm very glad when I, myself, not other people from outside the community, can explore the issues of my own community. I now have opportunities to speak up and what I say is evidence-based, like a saying "Tell it like there are books and evidence for it". That's why I felt very confident when I presented or shared something.

For the co-research findings, we discovered why children dropped out of school and worked out how to limit the situation. The issue may still persist, and we may not solve all the problems at the same time or right away, but I think we will solve them gradually, step-by-step. I also can contribute my small part to it. I myself have experience in solving similar problems. I can get to know the issues of my own community, or find out ways of solving problems, or write a report to present the problem to the local authorities or other stakeholders if I want my problem to be heard. That is the way I connect them with community issues.



STORY OF MS. BOI

Chu Thi Boi

*Tay Ethnicity,
Ban Trach Commune, Ba Be District,
Bac Kan Province*



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I think that if I keep sitting and doing nothing, then my community will also be just as silent because everyone says community work is none of their business. If I can do something - regardless how small it is, as long as it helps my community - it is better than just sitting still.



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Despite being of Tay ethnicity, I did not know much about *Then* singing myself and wondered how to make other ethnicities to be aware of our unique cultural identity. We consulted local people and decided to do research about *Then* singing.

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At the beginning, my group decided to study *Then* folk singing. Some older people said, “I doubt you can do anything. There is no point to ask questions, it is useless!” When the day of the *Then* singing festival came, they were surprised: “Well, it turns out you are able to sing *Then* songs which is very interesting as the cultural identity of our nation is gradually fading away. We’ve heard less and less *Then* songs. It is really meaningful for our community that you are able to revive them.” I felt so happy I could do something useful for my village.



(Above photo) Ms. Boi and the traditional Tinh zither of Tay minority.

The first day of co-researchers selection (the ‘participants as co-researchers’ method will hereafter be referred to as the ‘co-research method’), I had no idea what I could do but I still tried. Women in my group suggested I should try *Then* singing. Despite being of Tay ethnicity, I did not know much about *Then* singing myself and wondered how to make other ethnicities to be aware of our unique cultural identity. We consulted local people and decided to do research about *Then* singing.

Then singing to *Tinh* zither is part of the traditional cultural identity of Tay ethnic people. When I was little I sometimes heard the songs on the radio at home, but they were rarely performed in the village. The elders used to sing *Then* when they came home from work and felt tired or during holidays but this custom eventually faded away. I wanted to find out why. Why was I not taught *Then* songs? I wanted to restore and preserve the tradition for future generations so that *Then* would be sung on more occasions. Singing when I am tired, while returning home from work, or just joining other people singing, is cheerful, relaxing and fun. It can be beneficial to the community.





We can speak up, deepen our knowledge and we work more effectively.



In other training classes, the participants often follow the instructions step by step. With the co-research method, it is different. We learn and play at the same time, which makes us feel more comfortable. We can speak up, deepen our knowledge and we work more effectively.

There are also a number of challenges we face. The most difficult thing is to persuade more people to join me. Villagers' perspectives are different from mine, so it is important to explain myself further so that they understand and feel like joining in. What this means, for example, is that I may tell them that by doing this activity, we can contribute to bettering the community, but they might fail to understand how. So I need to explain to them in detail. Whenever they do not understand, I'm ready to provide the explanation.

When I joined the co-research group, my son was still little. Fortunately, I had support from my family. My husband asked why I did not just dive into the work and that if I just sat and waited, I would never know what I wanted to do. He told me, "You can do whatever I can't. I can take care of our son, at least."



Women here work and work and work. We are able to do the same things men do. There's no distinction between men's and women's jobs as there was in the past. Now, we do everything. Previously, women cleaned the house, washed the dishes and clothes. Nowadays, it might be the same in some households, but the majority of men help with housework.

Our village meetings are mostly attended by women, men rarely join. Since people nowadays think men and women are equal, it does not matter who is making the decisions. Husbands are consulted when decisions are related to land or housing issues. Other issues such as what crops to cultivate or what livestock to raise can be decided by the wives alone. Even at constituents' meetings or the meetings related to policies and guidelines of the State, women constitute the majority of the participants and they often raise their opinions. However, there are many women who still hesitate to speak up as they feel under-educated and that they lack awareness about the issues being discussed.



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Previously, when I attended the Women’s Union meeting, the elders would not pay attention to what a younger person said. But now, when I speak, they often listen. This is a big change.

Honestly speaking, prior to my participation in the co-research method, I was quite timid and shy to contact people, even though I studied a lot. I was not used to raising my voice. I listened when I attended meetings at the People’s Committee. I took notes when people provided their comments, but I did not dare to share my views. When I took part in the co-research group, I realized that I should not sit quietly like that. Why not to speak up? I was wrong to keep quiet. If I did not voice my views, how would people know the issues I had or where I felt confused or stuck. That is why I boldly share my opinions now.

After joining the co-research group, people started to notice me, they look at me differently now. Previously, when I attended the Women’s Union meeting, the elders would not pay attention to what a younger person said. But now, when I speak, they often listen. This is a big change.





(Left photo) A Tay ethnic minority girl in *Then* singing class, organized by Ms. Boi and local residents.

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I intend to share my ideas with my village so that people understand and spread the word about this traditional art performance.

I intend to share my ideas about *Then* singing and *Tinh* zither with my village so that people understand and spread the word about this traditional art performance. Many people joining together will bring a much greater effect than me going alone to rally people's participation one by one. I've been sharing my ideas at the Women's Union meetings and on any occasion that emerges.

I think that if I keep sitting and doing nothing, then my community will also be just as silent because everyone says community work is none of their business. If I can do something – regardless how small it is, as long as it helps my community – it is better than just sitting still.



STORY OF MS. XIEM

Trieu Thi Xiem

*Dao Ethnicity,
Banh Trach Commune, Ba Be District,
Bac Kan Province*



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I think whatever we do, we need to research to gradually understand it better first. Money is also important, but when we buy something that we know nothing about, not even its origin, we will not know whether it creates harm or benefit.



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Then, we came across the issue of the village meeting house. I was well aware that it was damaged. I was scared because I did not know what steps to take since it was a house for the whole village, the whole community, but our group was only four members.



At the beginning of the co-research training¹, I liked it a lot. I had a camera and I was free to take pictures of anything I liked. I went to many places and took a lot of pictures. When it came to choosing a topic, the whole group discussed, even quarreled. Some wanted to choose this topic, others preferred another. At first, we chose the topic of fish rearing, but we later changed our minds as fish rearing only served private household purposes and was not for bringing to the market. We then chose the topic of planting bananas, but agreed that banana plantations were too popular so it was useless to do research on that. I felt I wanted to quit. But finally, I said to myself, “I know it’s challenging, but other people managed to do something, so why can’t I?”

Then, we came across the issue of the village meeting house. I was well aware that it was damaged. I was scared because I did not know what steps to take since it was a house for the whole village, the whole community, but our group was only four members. Nobody around supported us. They all objected to the idea. They thought we would fail, that we were only common citizens, what research could we do? “If you were that great, you would have earned a Master’s degree” – was one statement that was directed at me. But I decided that it was not important whether they objected or not.



I decided that it was not important whether they objected or not.

When we conducted our research, what I found most difficult was to go and ask questions at households. I was afraid they would not understand and suspect us. They would keep asking questions such as: “Why are you here? How come you’re suddenly meeting with us? Why do you take a camera with you? What do you want to investigate?” At the time, I was very hesitant. I had to explain to them about the co-research and about the aims of the whole group.

However, it was also a great deal of fun. The most hilarious things happened when I had the chance to go to many places that I had never been to before, such as climbing the mountain on Na Ma with magnificent scenery. Or, there was a time when we came to a house to interview an uncle who was frying tofu. Our group of four was hungry, so we offered to buy four pieces of tofu to eat, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to last the long walk up the slope, which was so long in the hot weather. He declined to let us pay, saying it was not much trouble and gave us each one piece. Oh dear, we will remember it forever.



During our research, the village meeting house was severely damaged, now it is half reconstructed and equipped with furniture. When we first started working, everybody said that what we were doing only benefited ourselves and not the village. When the tables, chairs and other pieces of furniture came in, everybody asked who bought them and whether they came from the village budget or from whom? The Head of the Women's Union said, "We had to think until our heads nearly exploded in order to buy them all!" And then they understood the contribution and efforts of the research team.

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A great deal of fun when I had the chance to go to many places that I had never been to before, such as climbing the mountain on Na Ma with magnificent scenery.



In my family, I often consult my husband and also expect my husband to respect me, but it is not necessary to just follow his way because mine may actually be right. When my husband first heard about my participation in the co-research group, he immediately objected. He told me to quit and thought it was pointless, and that what I did would make villagers hate me or look down on me. I remember crying for several days when I participated in the training. In the morning, I went to the training and in the evening, I called him and we quarreled.

After that, I told my husband, “The purpose of doing a co-research is to build women’s capacity and to empower them. I would like to explore what this is because I’ve never done it before.” He also asked me to see if the work was paid. I told him money was not important; I was just curious to explore. After that, he said, “Fine! I go to work and there is nobody home. If you can arrange or manage the housework, then you can go.” So, every time I went to the training, I brought my grandmother to stay in my house and take care of my kids during the four days. I prepared everything to be ready before I went to the training - collecting firewood, chopping down bananas, and so on.

My curiosity urges me to always want to know about new things. Most people quit when they feel tired or bored, but for me, the more difficult it is, the more I want to explore. I will not quit, even if my husband protests, I will find ways to persuade him.



Most people quit when they feel tired or bored, but for me, the more difficult it is, the more I want to explore.

Before I participated in the co-research, I was very timid and shy whenever I met a stranger. I just smiled but did not dare to talk. I would not dare to talk when someone asked me something because I was afraid I would give the wrong answer. Now I feel much more confident. Previously, I did not dare to speak in village meetings or Women’s Union meetings because I always felt anxious and trembled with fear. But then, since I did the co-research, I have been talking more because I’m more confident. There’s no reason why I can’t do it.

After I finished my co-research, my husband also changed his way of looking at me! He doesn’t talk to me as if he was giving commands or orders anymore. He discusses and asks for my opinion in everything he does. Even in my social life, my friends also treat me as an equal; there’s no discrimination, especially from the ones who used to think that I was inferior.







I hope that in the future, I will be able to do plenty of other research to open up knowledge to all the women in the village.



Now, if I start some activity in the community, I believe I will be able to do it even if I do it all alone. I'm confident enough to do any research. I think whatever you do, you need to do research. You will gradually get to know the thing better and better. Money is also important. But when we buy something that we know nothing about, not even its origin, we will not know whether it causes harm or benefit.

Now I'm researching on the teaching of the Nho language to children. Young and even middle-aged people these days know very little of the Nho language. Only very old men – like my grandfather – can write in the Nho language, almost all of them know how to write. I think that if children are not taught the Nho language, it will fade away. One day there will be no more Nho language. I asked my husband to learn, but he was shy and hesitant. But my child only took one session and he remembered and memorized everything.

I hope that in the future, I will be able to do plenty of other research to open up knowledge to all the women in the village. Their capacity and confidence will be enhanced. They will become more confident when they communicate with or meet someone.



INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY

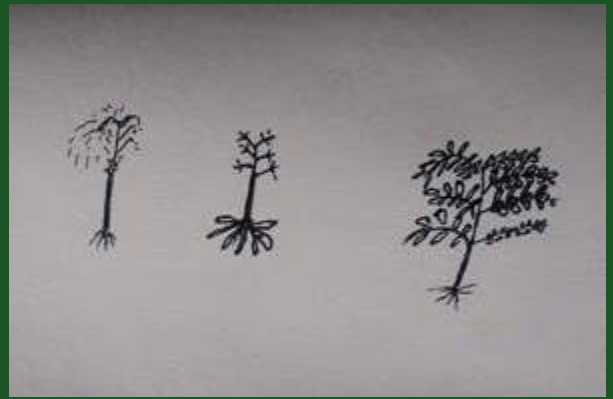
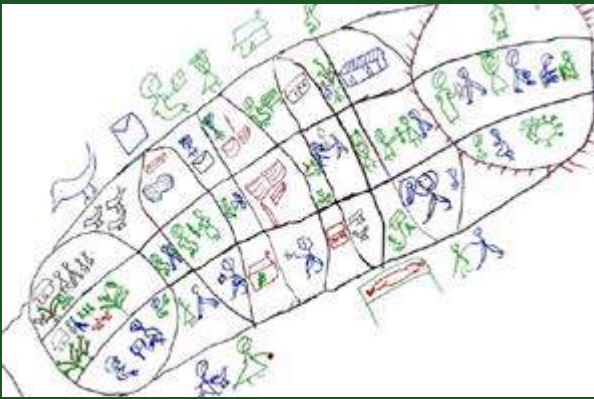
Gender Action Learning System

WITH SUPPORT OF



Gender Action Learning System (GALS) is a methodology to promote leadership within the community to enable its members to:

- Create livelihood workplans and personal life plans;
- Act collectively and advocate for gender equality to create change;
- Elevate organizational awareness and change the power relations between individuals and service providers, government agencies and other related units.

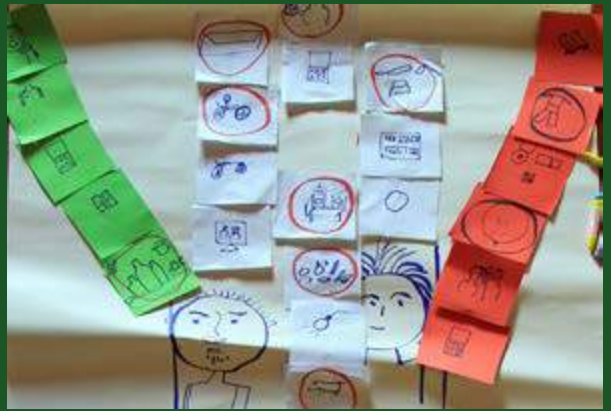


GALS is based on the WEMAN project by Oxfam Novib with gender expert Linda Mayoux and the implementation process used by different local CSOs in Uganda, Sudan, Peru and India. In Viet Nam, Oxfam collaborates with the Center for Community Empowerment (CECEM) on a few projects that aim to spread this methodology. GALS includes:

- A set of principles relating to gender justice, participation and leadership
- A set of visual tools that is made into charts to analyse pictures, plans and changes, that individuals, households and relevant groups can implement;
- An equal learning mechanism and promotion of life-long learning;
- Sustainable GALS mainstreaming mechanism in intervention organizations and projects such as financial services, commercial development services and accelerated agriculture.

GALS is designed to complement economic development programmes:

- Enhance learning and action skills for vulnerable groups, helping them identify and implement strategies to accelerate resources, economic opportunities and power in negotiation;
- Promote the use of individual and community skills, energy and resources to change power relations and gender relations using a win-win strategy.



The first exercise is to establish ownership in the community and prioritize actions for gender justice throughout community members' and organizations' activities: Step 1 supports participants' self-development and is followed by creating a family vision, before analysing the current situation (step 2). In order to promote the meaning of success and causal relations, participants reflect upon their action process. In step 3, participants identify opportunities and challenges that will affect the creation of their own vision. Step 4 focuses on helping participants identify goals and important milestones, and finally step 5 requires participants to build relevant actions to realize the vision.

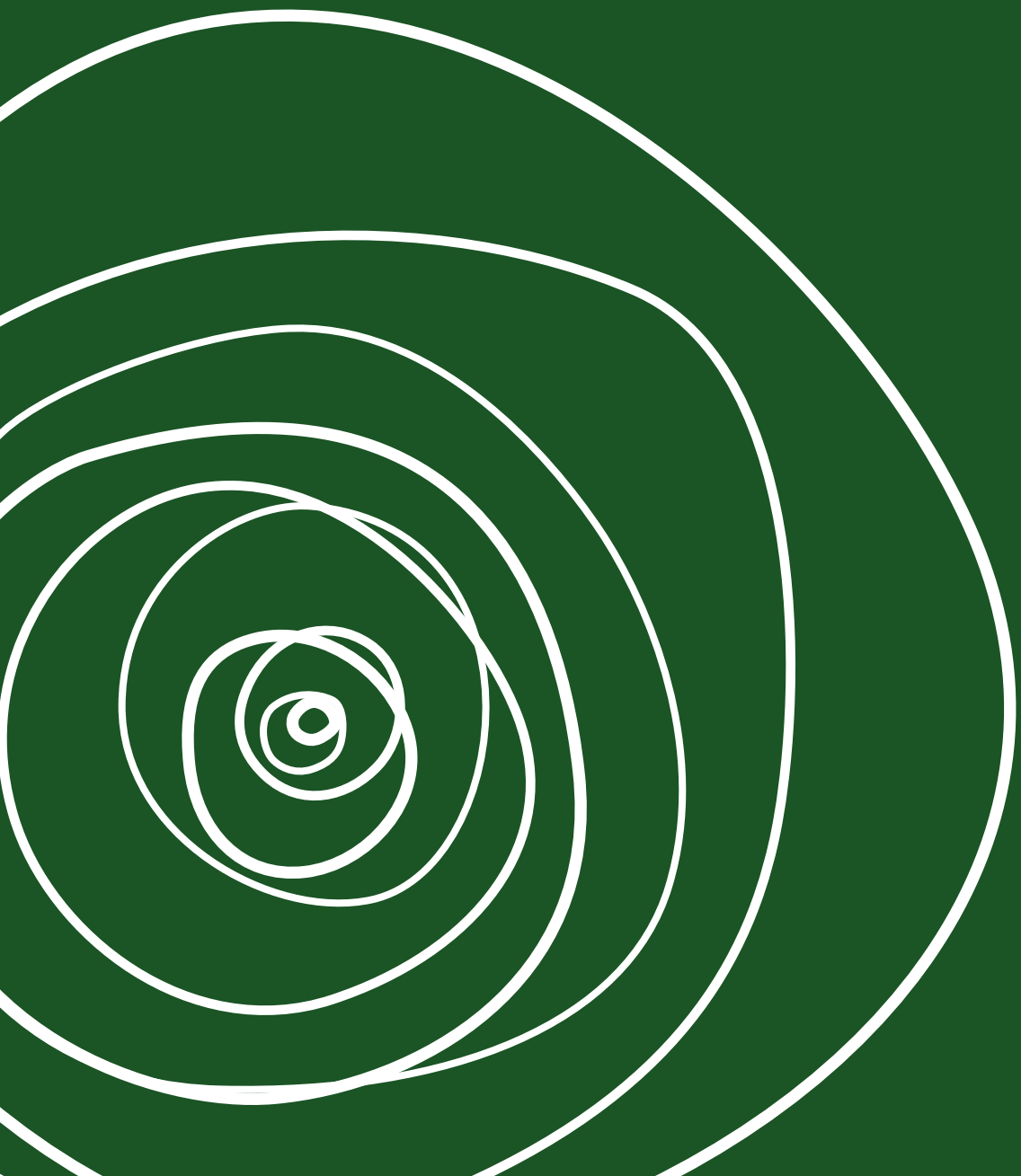


When applying this methodology, participants will go through 4 phases that include engagement and the use of visual tools rather than documents. Therefore, this methodology allows the creation of workplans and analysis in an effective and holistic manner.

- Phase 1: Transform gender issues and power relations into basic charts and maps.
- Phase 2: Learn through action/experience with vulnerable groups to identify gender and poverty issues at different levels, start the implementation of transformational strategies at mid-range level, promote cooperation and equal sharing.
- Phase 3: Identify, create workplans and negotiate win-win strategies with different parties. This phase promotes the involvement of relevant stakeholders with abundant power.
- Phase 4: Enhance sustainability of the learning through a process of action/experience including the promotion of equal learning, policy advocacy

and creating a workplan preparing for constant changes alongside with currently achieved goals.

GALS has proved its effectiveness in creating collaborative, win-win relations between communities and enterprises, service providers, government agencies and authorities, as well as changing gender relations in the areas of the right to own assets, the right to decision-making and violence. The methodology has been piloted and/or implemented in 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Oxfam seeks more innovative ideas in the implementation of GALS in different contexts, value chains, with CSOs, the private sector and government partners at different levels.



STORY OF MS. OANH

Luong Thi Oanh

*Khmer ethnicity,
Hoa Tu 1 commune, My Xuyen district,
Soc Trang province*



“

I like the Gender Balance Tree the most. Once we finished developing the tree, we realized women were disadvantaged – they work all the time but it is their husbands who makes decisions. We should raise our voices.



(Left photo) Ms. Oanh took picture with her mother (in the middle) and her siblings.



(Left photo) Ms. Oanh (in the middle) when she was at school with Kinh students.

Ethnic minority women used to be very disadvantaged. My mother is a Khmer woman and she married a Chinese-Vietnamese man who mistreated her. People looked down on ethnic minority people, and so did my father. He was so patriarchal and bullied my mother all the time. In my generation, things have improved. I can go to school and be employed without facing some of the barriers from the past.

I got married in 2010 and started to live with my husband's family here. After the wedding, I planned to get a job but I soon became pregnant with my first child. Then my father-in-law died and we could not leave my mother-in-law at

home all alone, so I decided to stay home instead of going to work. As women, my mother-in-law and I were not entitled to manage the family's money. Our family's only income came from selling shrimp and my husband managed it. Everyday, he gave me money to buy groceries at the market and if I needed anything, I would tell him and he would give me the money to buy it.

In the past, I did not raise my voice, thinking I was a daughter-in-law and had to follow the in-laws' rules. I thought that was the responsibility of a daughter-in-law. Many times I felt unhappy but I did not dare to say anything due to fear that neighbors would think I was not a good daughter-in-law.



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As women, my mother-in-law and I were not entitled to manage the family's money.

“

This is the Gender Balance Tree. As you can see, I do most of the jobs.



(Right photo) Ms. Oanh drew a Gender Balance tree of her family.

In 2016, I started participating in the Gender Action Learning System sessions. I had a chance to use the Gender Balance Tree and Gender Equality Diamond, and get to know disadvantaged women. They work all the time but it is their husbands who make the decisions. We should raise our voice. When I got home from a session, I drew the Gender Balance Tree on a piece of paper to show my husband which jobs are performed by husbands and which by wives. He had a look and then said: “Oh, why are there so many jobs on this side and so few on the other?” I answered: “This is the Gender Balance Tree. As you can see, I do most of the jobs. Do you see the difference between your side and mine?”



“

Since then, I have been managing all the expenditures in the family.

I still remember the first day I was allowed to manage money. It was a summer day and my husband transported shrimps to a customer and was paid 400–500,000 VND. I said: “You have been managing money for many years and we still do not have any savings. This time let me try managing it.” He gave me 300,000 VND. I was not sure if he was happy or unhappy. During that summer, he gave me the money he earned and I kept it. After two months, I was able to buy two-tenths of a tael¹ of gold. I showed the gold to him and said, “You see, I can do what I promise.”

⁽¹⁾ A unit of measurement in gold used in specific Southeast Asian countries. In Vietnam, it is equivalent to 37.5g of gold in transaction.

After that, my husband allowed me to keep all the money he earned from selling shrimps. I paid the costs of shrimp breeds and fertilizer, and kept the remaining amount. After two seasons, I was able to buy a motorcycle worth 45 million VND. Since then, I have been managing all the expenditures in the family. Although my husband is better at shrimp breeding, he engages me in the discussions and decision-making. For example, recently he decided to breed 60,000 – 70,000 shrimp, but I told him, “Our economic situation is limited, we should breed 50,000 shrimps only. Big business also means big risks.” He followed my advice.

NHIỆM KỲ 2015 - 2020

Hòa Tú 1, ngày 24 tháng 4 năm 2015





(Above photo) Ms. Oanh and the local GALs core group

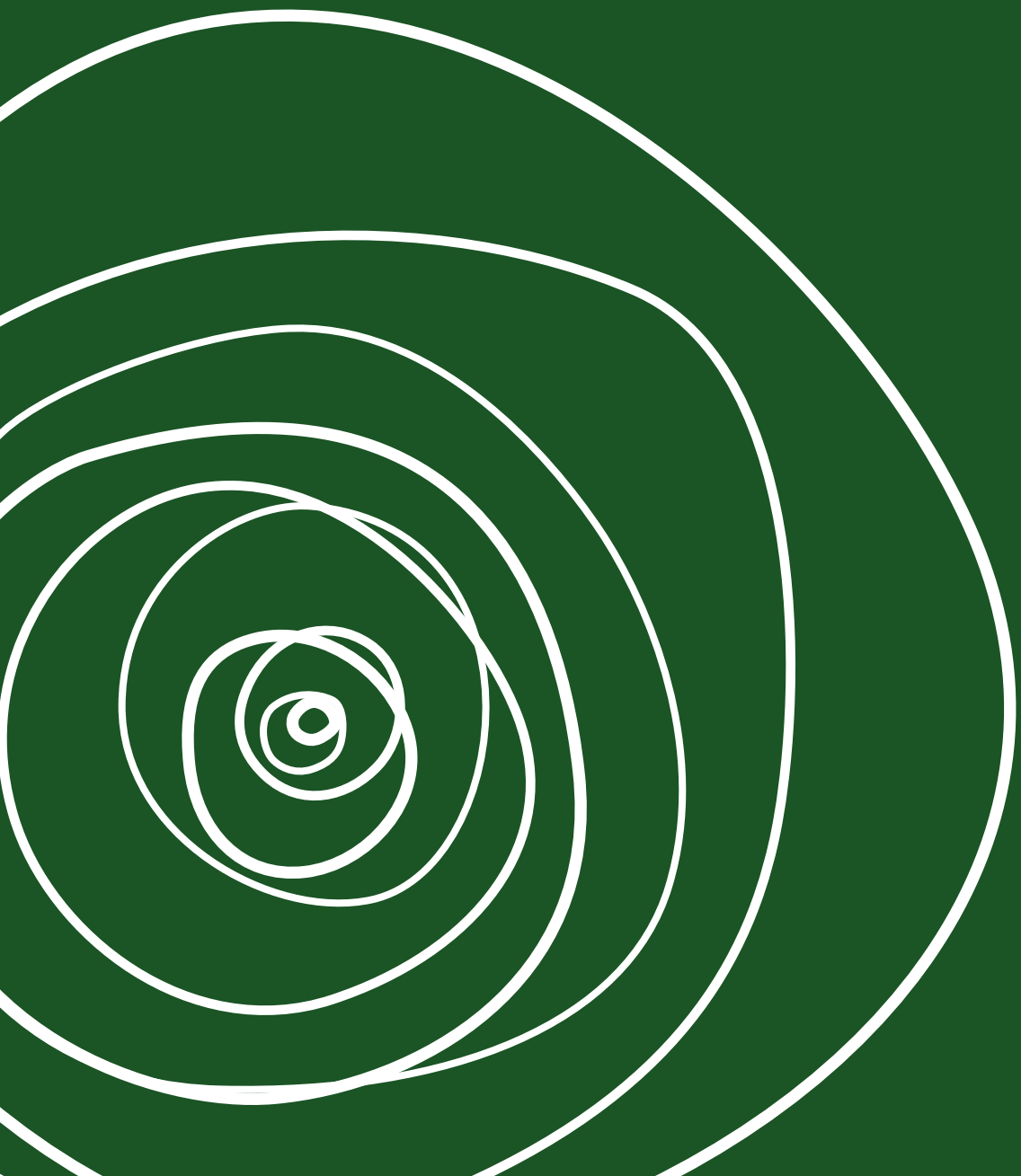
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It is so meaningful to me to share my knowledge with others.

I am currently a member of the local GALs core group. The group has five members who promote GALS tools with the community. I feel very confident and comfortable when sharing the Gender Balance Tree. People in the community participate in such sharing sessions actively. Both men and women are aware of the problems; the men say, “Oh, we do too little work.”

I have changed and am very happy about it. It is so meaningful to me to share my knowledge with others. I hope to help many women to change too and escape from backward stereotypes and prejudices to make their families happier.

(Left photo) Ms. Oanh shared the GALs tool with other people.



STORY OF MS. TUYEN

Vang Thi Tuyen

*Nung Ethnicity,
Bao Nhai Commune, Bac Ha District,
Lao Cai Province*



“

I used to think all housework was my responsibility, and that I should let my husband rest rather than engage him. But now I want to improve my life. I encourage my husband to share the tasks and help me with housework.



I joined the Gender Action Learning System team in 2015. Having participated in the exchanges and activities, I have become much more self-confident over time. Now I am the Secretary of the team.

I see that the Gender Balance Tree¹ can help pointing out clearly one's tasks and the most meaningful is the analysis on personal expenses. Before, I often prioritized my husband and children and I never wanted to spend any money on clothes for myself, thinking that it would be wasteful. Now I'm more open-minded, I love myself more. Sometimes, you need to dress nicely when you go out. Last Tet holiday, I bought myself a dress that I wore several days during the festive season and later to weddings.

⁽¹⁾A method in Gender Action Learning System to analyze gender balance and gender relations.

“

Before, I often prioritized my husband and children and I never wanted to spend any money on clothes for myself, thinking that it would be wasteful. Now I'm more open-minded, I love myself more.



When it comes to housework, I am in charge of most daily tasks because my husband works far away from home. He returns home every two or three days, sometimes once a week. I used to think all housework was my responsibility and that I should let my husband rest rather than engage him. But now I want to improve my life. I encourage my husband to share the tasks and help me with housework. I said: "Please, help me. I've been doing housework all alone for many days. When you come home, I want you to share it with me." Gradually I assigned him more work to do. As a result, he helps me wash the dishes and cook.

A few days before the Tet holidays, I washed so many clothes that my hands turned red. Then I asked my husband, "Honey, shall we buy a washing machine this year?" My husband replied: "We don't have money, yet you want to buy everything!" I insisted: "Give it a thought. The winter is cold and it is really hard for me every time I wash the clothes by hand." Eventually, he agreed to buy a washing machine through rent to buy.



“

When I joined the team, my husband and I had just moved into our own house.



When I joined the team, my husband and I had just moved into our own house. I wanted to be independent, so I needed to secure an income. Both my children were still little, so I only had time to do work when they were at the kindergarten. On weekends they stayed at home and I would take care of them. There was no time for work, apart from household chores and cooking three meals a day.

Recently, I discussed with my husband about investing in cultivating crops on the abandoned hill. I asked the predecessors to learn about their experience with what kind of crops thrive in that soil. We thought of growing Indian mahogany, but it would be very costly and take too long, while Bodhi trees could quickly be harvested. Many people actually plant seedlings but we are consulting with a professional gardener to see if we should nurse the plants in pots first. By doing so, we would save time and money. I calculated how much money we need to invest and when we can expect the revenue. If we plant Bodhi trees, we can harvest them in ten years. At that time, it will provide us with money for our children to go to school. After the talk with my husband, we are determined to work towards this goal together.

INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY

Operations and maintenance work for community-based infrastructure facilities

WITH SUPPORT OF





⁽¹⁾ National Program to eradicate poverty (P135)

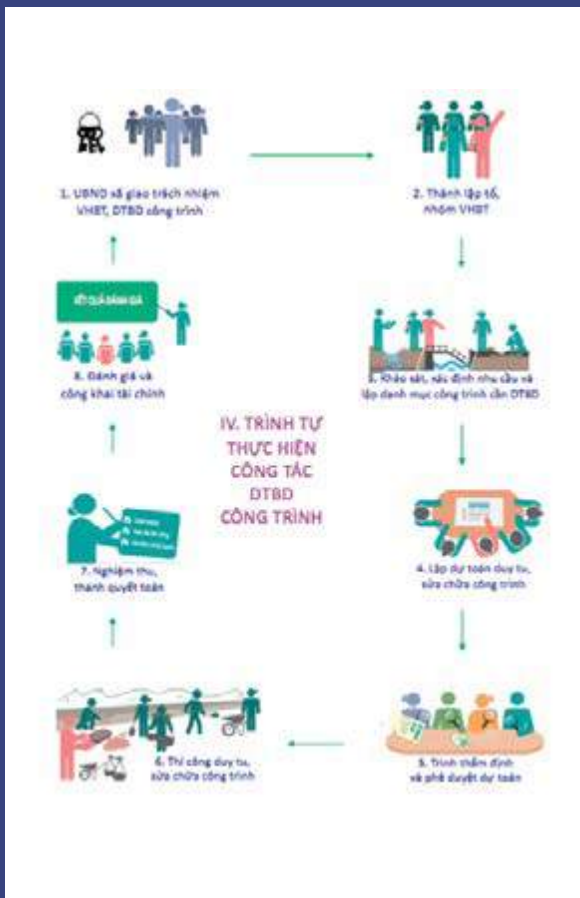
The methodology to operate and maintain community-based infrastructure facilities was developed and piloted with a few communes under Programme 135¹ of Hoa Binh province by the Research Center for Initiatives in Community Development (RIC) since 2013 with the support of Irish Aid.

Up until 2016, community groups have officially been handed the responsibility to manage the small-scale operations and maintenance of the capital budget in Du Sang, Hop Dong and Thuong Tien commune at Kim Boi district of Hoa Binh province. This model is also held in high regard by the local authorities both due to the economic benefits as well as the promotion of community values. This new method has attracted the local people's contribution, ensuring the sustainability of projects invested by public funding and enhancing local democracy.

In August 2017, the Department of Ethnic Minorities in Hoa Binh, in collaboration with RIC, organized a consultation workshop for the draft of the "Guide to management, operations and maintenance of post-investment in communes and villages under the funding of Programme 135 in the period 2016-2020". The content of community-based operations and maintenance was mainstreamed in this workshop.

This methodology is implemented in the following steps:

- **Step 1:** Establish a community group (CG): The CG includes beneficiaries from infrastructure facilities, operates on the basis of everyone's participation, transparent and responsible management, and aims to improve the lives of local people. The CG is selected in a community meeting organized by the project to introduce the idea of community-owned small-scale infrastructure facilities and to communicate the rights of the community in Programme 135.
- **Step 2:** Build capacity for the CG: in order to achieve the goal of improving the lives of local people, the CG needs to have the necessary competencies. The CG will be provided with a training course on the rights of the community in P135, especially in relation to implementing small-scale infrastructure facilities; creating workplans (operations and budget planning according to the guidelines of P135); financial management (procedures, rules and regulations relating to budget payment and balance of under P135); supervising and evaluating community projects; skills to promote and mobilize community participation.



• **Step 3:** The CG organizes commune meetings with local people and related parties (representatives of local authorities, the committee to manage the implementation of P135, etc.) to identify prioritized sites: after the CG's capacity in enhanced through training courses, they will make use of their skills to hold meetings with local people to identify local infrastructure facilities that need constructing. At the conclusion of the meeting, a list of facilities (arranged in order of priority) will be agreed upon by the local people. The community will decide which facilities will be prioritized and commit to contributing labour to construct the facility. Project officers will participate in the meetings as observers to ensure the participation of the local people during the decision-making process.

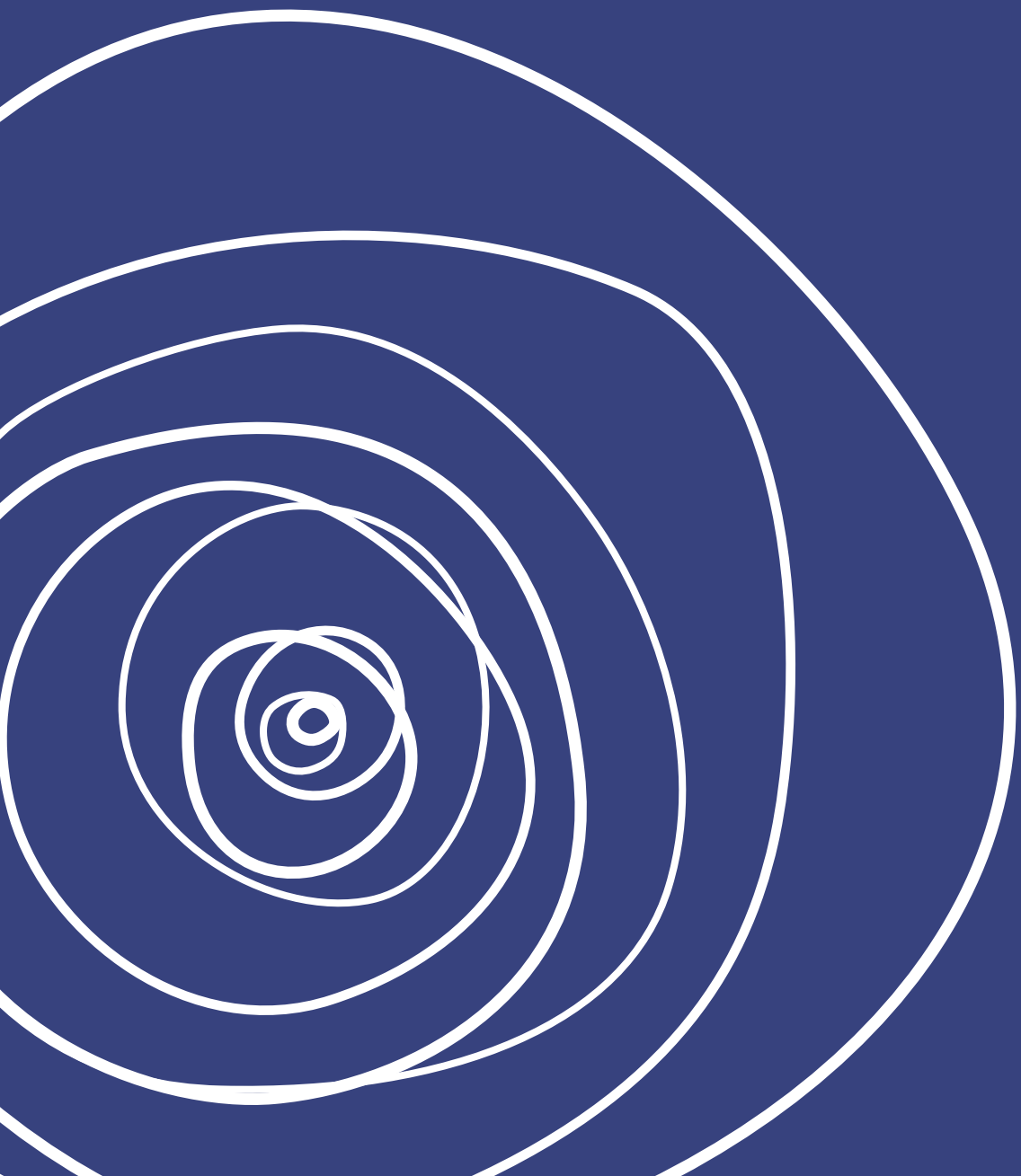
• **Step 4:** The CG creates the proposal/planned budget for the facility: after deciding which infrastructure facility has been prioritized, members of the CG meet to create a construction plan and budget plan (clarify the financial resources that need mobilizing to realize the facility – P135, project, contributed by the community). The construction plan and budget plan will follow exactly the required forms and regulations of P135. Throughout the entire process, local authorities and project officers will support the CG.

• **Step 5:** Evaluate and approve the plan: after planning the construction and budget, the CG will submit a workplan to the Evaluation Committee – consisting of the People’s Commune, People’s Council, Committee to Manage the Implementation of P135 and representative of the project. The Evaluation Committee will go over the workplan, provide inputs and modify (if needed) until all are in agreement.

• **Step 6:** Present the evaluation result to the community: after the workplan and budget plan is evaluated and approved, the CG will hold meetings to present the result to local people and mobilize the community to participate in the construction process. The responsibilities of other parties will also be assigned in this meeting.

• **Step 7:** Implement the plan and supervision: the CG mobilizes the community’s participation in the realization of the plan, appointing supervisors (superintendents, quality and quantity of materials, insurers, etc) throughout the process.

• **Step 8:** Evaluate the implementation of the plan: the CG holds meetings with the commune, with the presence of all related parties such as representatives of the local authorities and the committee to manage the implementation of P135, to transparently balance the budget and to evaluate the implementation process with the community, reflect on the lessons learned, plan for operations and maintenance and take care of other priorities.



STORY OF MS. BONG

Bui Thi Bong

*Muong Ethnicity,
Vang Village, Thuong Tien Commune,
Kim Boi District*



“

Women up in the hills only used to know how to use hoes and shovels. Nowadays, we know how to conduct a survey, we understand team work and financial management, including making the budget estimations.



I joined the team a few years ago but I was not appointed treasurer until last year. Oh, I was so anxious – I have never been a treasurer in my life! I have never kept hundreds of millions Vietnamese dong before. I don't even have a safe for money in my house as I never had much money.

At the beginning, I had second thoughts about being a treasurer, as it has never been easy when it comes to taking care of money. If anything should happen, I would never be able to sleep at night. On the other hand, if nobody dared to take on this position, we couldn't carry out our tasks. I told myself - I was entrusted with the money, so I must take responsibility for it. I must record every expense with care and clearly report the expenses to local people.

“

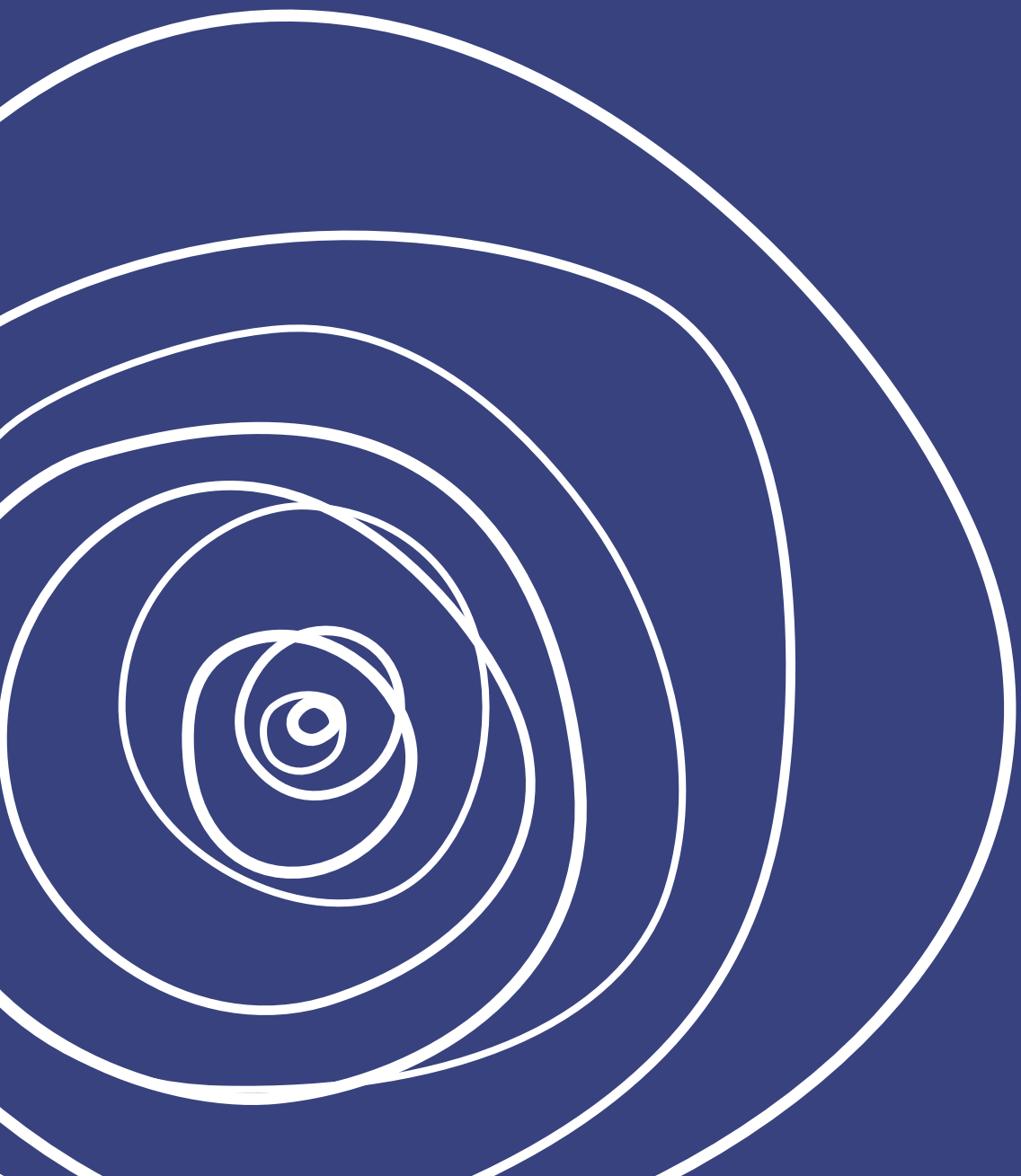
If nobody dared to take on this position, we couldn't carry out our tasks. I told myself - I was entrusted with the money, so I must take responsibility for it.

It was difficult but I really wanted to take on this task. It was the first time local people like us had the opportunity to discuss, make our own decisions, and do things on our own. If any challenges emerged, we could raise our opinions without fear because we are all equal.



In this area, our husbands typically work far away from home. Therefore, women have to handle everything at home, including work and childcare. When we joined this project, everyone helped each other.

There are 60 households in my village, divided into three groups where we would be assigned with different tasks. After over a month, the road was complete. Everyone was happy and we even organized a party to celebrate.



STORY OF MS. DUNG

Nguyen Thi Dung

*Muong ethnicity,
Vang village, Thuong Tien commune,
Kim Boi district*



“

I feel tired but proud because this concrete road was built and no one but I myself made the decision to build it.



When it was my group's turn, my household and other members had to do the construction. When the other group took over, we supervised. There was a rotation system.



Before, the morning shift workers used to leave unused material at the construction site, so the afternoon shift workers had to transport the material to the storage place far away. It led to complaints and quarrels. At first I let them argue without intervening. Then I provided an explanation and mediation, which made people slowly calm down. I said that the road construction was a joint effort for all our mutual benefit and that everyone should empathize with each other instead of arguing.

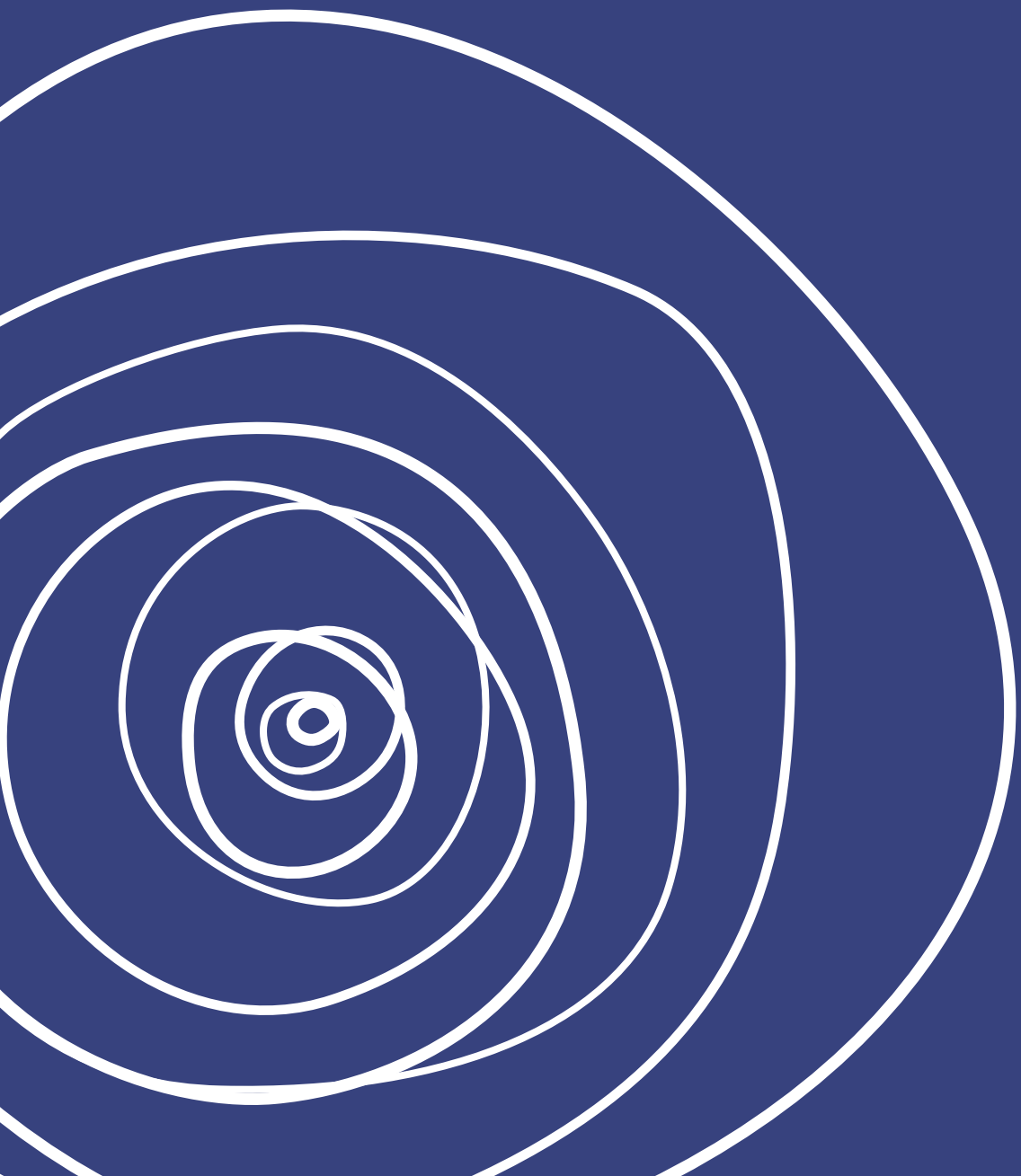
We worked hard for months. Sixty households were divided into three groups. When it was my group's turn, my household and other members had to do the construction. When the other group took over, we supervised. There was a rotation system. After returning home from construction work, I had to take care of my children and prepare meals for the family.

I feel tired but proud because this concrete road has been built and I myself decided to build it.



I know that when local people like us do the construction ourselves, it requires more effort and time. On the other hand, if it is done by a construction company, the quality of the construction may be lower. We do it ourselves to control the progress every day.

I hope our economic conditions will stabilize now. Women are often tied to taking care of children, so we cannot work far away from home like men. Income from growing bamboo shoots and vegetables is not enough to cover our living expenses. I hope we can have some other work to earn additional income.



STORY OF MS. LUA

Đinh Thi Lua

*Muong Ethnicity,
Vang Village, Thuong Tien Commune,
Kim Boi District*



“

Perhaps people thought men are better at building roads, so they selected more men than women. However, women have their strengths. If any conflict emerges during the working process, we use a tactful, gentle approach and therefore we can solve any problem.



The road in Vang village used to be very muddy. Whenever it rained, the mud always flooded our wheels. We went up to the hill to pick bamboo shoots but were unable to bring them home because of the mud. Several parts of the road were built under Programme 135 but they deteriorated after a few years. There are many small and big holes in the roads. I stumbled and fell several times. For local people, the road is essential because all forms of livelihood depend on it.

The project started in 2015. First we focused on clean water, then we built a ditch, and in 2017, we constructed this road. We felt so happy when our village was selected to take responsibility for the construction and infrastructure management. At the same time, we were a bit worried as we are laymen; we did not know anything about road construction. And we were concerned how to manage so many local people during the working process.



For local people, the road is essential because all forms of livelihood depend on it.



The households elected 12 people, including four women, to become the road management team. Perhaps people thought men are better at building roads, so they elected more men than women. However, women have their strengths. If any conflict emerges during the working process, we use a tactful, gentle approach and therefore we can solve any problem.

During the training (from RIC), I learned how to create a plan. When I returned home, I was able to work with the village head, developing a work schedule for construction. I care a lot about transparency. I held three or four meetings to collect the views and comments from all the households before we started the construction. Everyone was informed how much money was spent.”

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