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## USAID PROGRAM ENABLES CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS TO REACH FOREST COMMUNITIES, IMPROVE EQUITY



Community members and USAID GREEN Mekong trained CSO representatives participate in a committee meeting in Lamam District, Xekong Province, Lao PDR

*Photo credit: Somkhith Panyasiri, AFC, Lao PDR*

### Reaching forest communities and people at the grassroots level through local CSOs protects livelihoods

*“When communities understand how the equity approach helps protect their rights, they embrace it.”*

September 2015 — *“Forest communities understand the forests they live in, but often they are not included in the decision-making process, especially the women. This makes them vulnerable and it makes the forests vulnerable.”* This, according to Somkhith Panyasiri, the civil society organization (CSO) representative to USAID GREEN Mekong from Agro-Forestry Development Consultancy (AFC) in Lao PDR, is why strengthening equity in these communities is so important.

When working with forest communities in Lao PDR, Mr. Panyasiri frequently sees the gender gap, and as AFC's expert in non-timber forest products, he knows why it's important to include women, *"Women work hard in these communities. They collect food from the forests. They take care of the forests."* But, if forest governance and management is inequitable, the entire community is at risk.

To solve this problem, USAID GREEN Mekong and implementing partner RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests developed a capacity strengthening plan with representatives from 20 local CSOs from across five Lower Mekong countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam). The series of training, which focused on building skills to improve equity in grassroots communities, concluded in September 2015, and representatives are already applying their skills and seeing results.

*"While we already had gender as part of our program, the equity training has given us a framework",* said Ms. Khine Khine Swe from Friends of Wildlife in Myanmar. *"And this framework helps us evaluate equity in the communities and helps us explain it to the communities".*

The training has also helped build networks, connecting CSOs to each other. Mr. Panyasiri recently partnered with Ms. Khambang Thippavong, the CSO representative from Lao Biodiversity Association (LBA) to train a community in Lamam District, Xekong Province, Lao PDR. Putting their resources together for this project, they were able to assess the equity issues affecting the community and began to facilitate setting up a forest co-management community committee for five villages, focusing on improving gender equity.

The evaluation led by AFC and LBA, made possible by the skills learned in the USAID GREEN Mekong training, revealed a significant gender gap in the decision-making process and a lack of participation from women in village meetings, sometimes with women never having participated before. To solve this, among other activities, they began organizing village-level training on gender equity and study tours with other districts to demonstrate the benefits of female participation. *"When we began training on gender equity, it had an immediate impact. Meetings changed from no women to 30 percent women after two workshops."*

There is a lot of work remaining across the region, but now CSOs are better prepared to tackle social equity. *"Before the training",* said Ms. Khine Khine Swe, *"we didn't know how to approach communities. We didn't know where to start with capacity building. But this training gave me a model. Now I have more confidence we can help communities help themselves. I understand equity, I know if a community has equity and I can help bring equity."*

The three-year project, which began in 2012, aims to improve capacities of policymakers and grassroots stakeholders in the Lower Mekong region to promote equity in forest-based climate change mitigation policy and practice.