



Reflecting on Change

Formative Mid-Term Review of the project “Northern Upland Promoting Climate Resilience”

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Pictures have been provided by CARE Lao PDR (cover page, p.30) and the international consultant (p.9, 17).

Miguel Coulier,
April 2016

List of acronyms

CBA	Community Based Adaptation
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CCL	Comité de Coopération avec le Laos
CVCA	Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis
DAFO	Department of Agriculture and Forestry
DONRE	Department of Natural Resources and Environment
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MONRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MTR	Mid-Term Review
NDMC	National Disaster Management Committee
NSCC	National Strategy on Climate Change
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Product
NU PCR	Northern Upland Promoting Climate Resilience
PONRE	Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment
REW	Remote Ethnic Women
SAEDA	Sustainable Agriculture & Environment Development Association
SPDRM	Strategic Plan on Disaster Risk Management
VSLA	Village Saving and Loan Association
WORD	Women Organized for Rural Development

Executive summary

Climate change is increasingly felt by farmers in Phongsaly, the northernmost province of Lao PDR, who depend on weather for maintaining their livelihoods and ecosystems. A more unpredictable length, start and end of the rainy and dry seasons, stronger winds and storms, longer droughts but at the same time increased intensity of rainfall resulting in floods and localized landslides, and erratic temperature patterns with more severe cold and hot spells all heavily impact on livelihoods, people and natural resources. At the same time, farmers are positively as well as negatively influenced by other socio-economic influences such as infrastructure development, international and local market pressures, modernization of agriculture, hydropower expansion and increased connectivity.

Within this dynamic resilience context, CARE, CCL and SAEDA in partnership with local authorities are implementing the '*Northern Uplands Promoting Climate Resilience*' (NU PCR) project, in 3 districts of Phongsaly province. Through targeted support on climate risk analysis and planning, gender-responsive livelihood and disaster risk reduction interventions, and research and documentation for advocacy and scaling, the project aims to improve the resilience of communities in 30 villages, directly reaching 1,500 farming households and indirectly more than 78,000 women and men. The project started in 2014 and will be implemented until March 2018.

The NU PCR project has commissioned a mid-term review to assess relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the project strategies towards achieving the overall objective to date, assess how the project is integrating gender and how this can be enhanced to transform unequal gender relations. The review applied a participatory and strengths-based approach and used a variety of tools such as desk review, key informant interviews, reflection exercises and knowledge, attitude and practice mapping. It was conducted in February-March 2016.

The **key findings**, arranged by assessment criteria, are:

Relevance:

- The NU PCR project design adequately identifies the complex resilience context as experienced by communities and local authorities, including pertinent underlying drivers of vulnerability as well as a number of other non-climate socio-economic pressures;
- It is consistent with farmer needs for livelihood protection and diversification, access and use of credit, techniques and climate and non-climate information, and entrenched gender issues;
- It is strongly in line with national and local Government priorities, such as on livelihood resilience and agro-climate information, disaster preparedness and response, credit, community-based planning and local or public awareness. It also significantly responds to a need for Government capacity building and research and learning on what adaptation or resilience means in practice for Phongsaly and Lao PDR;
- In terms of beneficiary accountability, while input from Government partners is collected through the regular project management meetings, the project has yet to identify the most appropriate mechanism to gather independent feedback from communities;

Effectiveness:

- Even though the design provides an accurate analysis of the resilience context, it responds to this context with the same level of complexity, much ambition but limited prioritization, particularly on building community resilience. The project team therefore undertook a re-alignment process to reach a shared understanding of different elements of resilience and how the project can contribute to it;
- Overall, the project implementation is slightly off-track with a delay of ten to twelve months. This is mostly due to a lengthy process for getting the Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Lao signed, capacity limitations on climate change, the complexity of the project topic and approaches, and the investment in CVCA for CBA capacity building and developing quality interventions;
- Still, all partners agree that project beneficiary and activity targets will be achieved and that the project will be back on track before the end of this year, with result 2 activities already accelerating at the time of the MTR;

- At this stage, the project has contributed the most to: increased individual (not yet Government institutional) capacity, awareness about weather variability and climate change, a comprehension of the Phongsaly risk context and documentation. The project has also started to contribute to community resilience, but it is too soon to already ascertain impact;
- In terms of risk management; although it is a crucial component of adaptive project management and can easily be integrated into project M&E and reporting, it hasn't been applied yet by the project team. For a project dealing with climate resilience and a number of other challenges, a useful tool such as risk management needs to be better applied;
- Sustainability is already been considered by the project, through its design and additional measures identified during the mid-term review. These need to be continuously implemented and monitored;

Efficiency:

- Due to a late finalization of the project Memorandum of Understanding and a focus on CVCA and other analysis, which does not require considerable budget, project expenditure is currently low at 34%. With implementation of result 2 activities accelerating, this should increase from 2016 onwards;
- The NU PCR multi-stakeholder partnership encountered some challenges in the first years of implementation, but is growing in the right direction and potentially becoming more than the sum of its parts;
- However, there is still room for improvement on: more efficient meetings and coordination, staff exchange and partners building each other's capacity, engagement with senior level Government, applying a collaborative way of working rather than geographical, field staff's understanding of partnership roles and responsibilities, Government ownership and engagement in M&E;
- The very ambitious project requires a sizeable implementation team with a strong technical understanding of a variety of issues. At the time of the MTR, important capacity gaps on climate change have yet to be filled in more permanently and the current size of the team needs to increase to the expected number as per the design;

Gender and women's empowerment:

- There is a genuine interest and commitment among the implementation team as well as the Government partners to work on gender and address underlying drivers of vulnerability. If the intended results on gender are achieved, a strong contribution will be made to the CARE REW Program but also to international discussions and evidence on addressing gender equality within resilience;
- Government partners see a significant improvement on gender over the last five years, mainly in terms of women's participation in household and public decision-making, improved sharing of information due to better literacy and education, improved financial literacy, increased mobility of women due to improved road access, and more women in Government leadership or senior positions;
- The project team has been trained on gender, a preliminary Gender Action Plan is in draft form, a local staff member was recently appointed and trained as gender advisor (for all projects) and gender progress tracking is integrated as part of the regular reporting. However, staff still requires a better understanding of how to practically address the main gender issues within this project meaning which specific actions to take on gender beyond only providing training or information or increasing women's participation in project activities;
- NU PCR has a strong potential to achieve more transformational impact on gender, if focusing on a number of issues rather than trying to address everything. Since current levels of gender equality are different per village and district, tailored interventions are needed on a case by case basis as well as engaging with men strategies.

Based on these findings, a set of **recommendations** has been formulated, which are more elaborately described in the last section of the report:

Result 1:

- Revise CVCA to better integrate gender and link it to community and Government planning. Develop it into an annual update and feedback mechanisms, focused on reviewing and planning adaptation actions;
- Continue improving capacity through a more strategic institutional capacity building plan, including promoting inter-sectoral and inter-district collaboration;

- Facilitate the development of a climate change strategy or action plan for Phongsaly province, and use this as an opportunity for advocacy on NU PCR good practice;

Result 2:

- Re-prioritize livelihood support to more long term and community resilience interventions;
- Covert small-scale livelihood support into more commercially viable opportunities with inter-cropping potential;
- Increasingly put farmers more 'in the driving seat';
- Be aware of community governance issues and power imbalances, for example with farmer groups and when working with village leaders;
- Apply a communication-for-behavioral change approach to awareness raising, including ambitious efforts to value ethnic minorities;

Result 3:

- Harmonize the project M&E tools and plan, and involve Government partners in participatory project M&E;
- Agree on a small number of topics to inform the project's advocacy strategy, and link documentation to this;
- Towards the end of the project, organize a lessons learned sharing opportunity, involving other districts;

Project management and partnerships:

- CARE to urgently recruit permanent climate change technical expertise;
- SAEDA to improve follow-up on training and other technical support provided to the project;
- Explore collaboration with a research institute;
- Introduce a beneficiary accountability mechanism;
- CCL and CARE to facilitate more and longer staff exchange among the project partners.

BACKGROUND



1. Project overview

With funding support from the European Union, CARE International in Lao PDR with partners CCL¹, SAEDA² and local authorities are implementing the “Northern Uplands Promoting Climate Resilience” (NU-PCR) project for Remote Ethnic Communities in 3 districts – Samphan, Mai and Ngot Ou - of Phongsaly province (see map). The project aims to directly benefit 1,500 farming households in 30 villages and indirectly more than 78,000 women and men living in the three target districts. The project started in 2014 and will be implemented until March 2018.

The overall objective of the project is to enable **improved resilience of remote ethnic upland communities, in particular women, to the impact of climate variability and change**. To realize this resilience objective, the project aims to achieve three results through a range of activities, centered on; capacity for climate risk analysis and planning; community based livelihood and disaster risk reduction interventions; and building evidence for replication or scaling CBA. Within all of this, ethnic minority women’s empowerment is crosscutting (see table below):

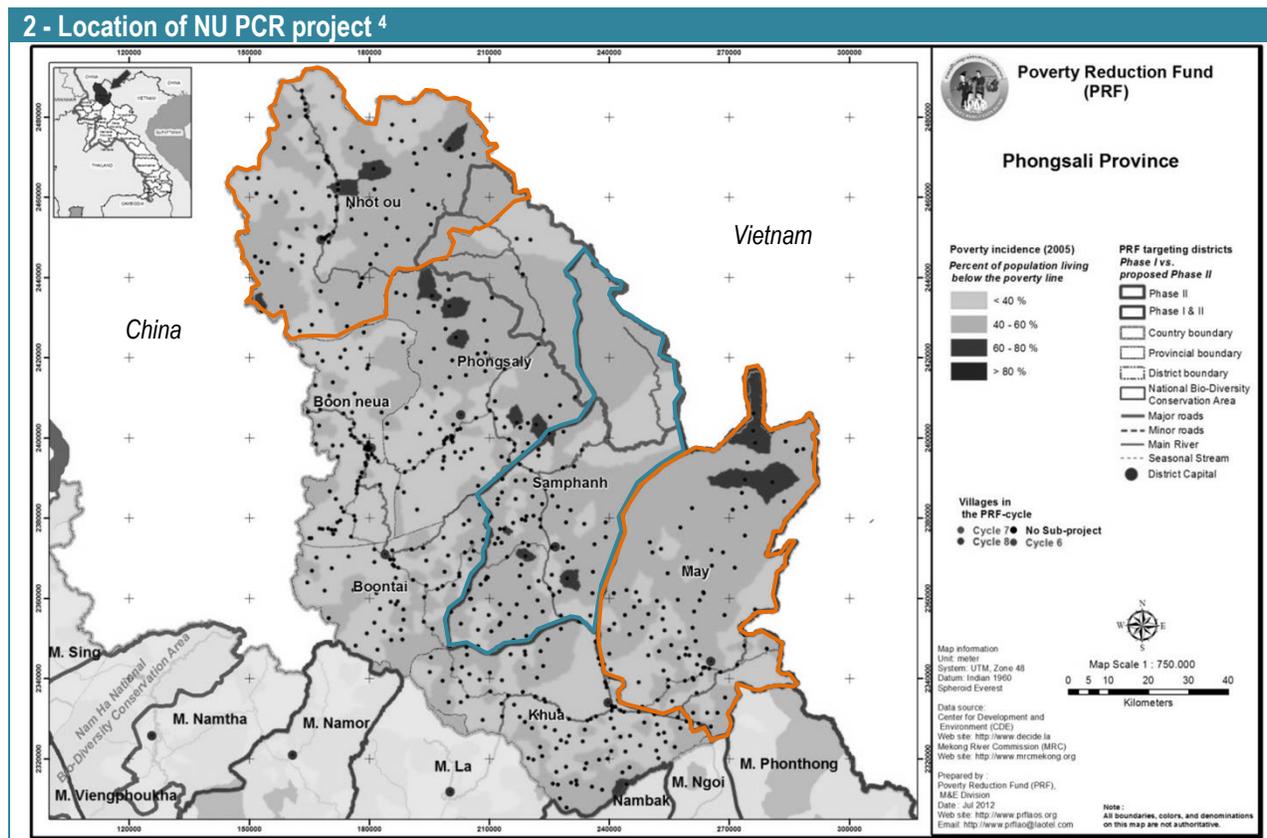
1 - Objectives, results and activities of the NU PCR project		
Overall objective: To enable improved resilience of remote ethnic upland communities, in particular women, to the impact of climate variability and change, and contribute to the achievement of MDGs 1, 3 and 7		
Specific objective: Remote ethnic women, their families and communities have increased their adaptive capacity with the support of capable local authorities and the application of sustainable adaptation models		
<p>Result 1 - Improved capacity of local stakeholders to assess, plan, and implement community-based adaptation (CBA) in a participatory and gender sensitive manner</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adapt Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis methodology; ▪ CVCA training for partners; ▪ Undertake CVCA process, including community and expert validation of CVCA results; ▪ Integration of CVCA results into village and district development plans; ▪ Strengthen village leadership; ▪ Design CBA interventions for result 2 activities; ▪ Developed IEC/training package for agriculture interventions; ▪ Climate change awareness and capacity building on key themes; 	<p>Result 2 - Improved community resilience through the implementation of climate change adaptation (CCA) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) pilot interventions that benefit women in particular;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Farmer group establishment; ▪ Agricultural training package for farmer groups; ▪ Voucher system to link farmers with agricultural input sellers; ▪ Awareness raising and community-led resilience measures, including disaster risk reduction; ▪ Community-based agro-climate information services; ▪ Village Saving and Loan Association (VSLA) groups targeted at women; ▪ Improve farmer value chain linkages; 	<p>Result 3 - Comprehensive documentation informs mainstreaming and an enabling CCA/DRR policy environment for the Northern Uplands.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Project monitoring and evaluation, including logbooks and participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E); ▪ Livelihood research; ▪ Baseline and end-line assessment; ▪ Formative mid-term review and end-of-project evaluation; ▪ Learning tours for farmers and other actors; ▪ Development and implementation of a project advocacy strategy; ▪ Documentation contributing to global CCA knowledge base.

¹ Comité de Coopération avec le Laos.

² Sustainable Agriculture & Environment Development Association.

2. Location³

The project is implemented in **Phongsaly**, the most Northern province of Lao PDR, which is administratively divided into 7 districts and shares a border with China (Yunnan province) and Vietnam (Dien Bien province). Phongsaly has a total population of around 176,151 represented by more than 28 different ethnic groups, with the majority being Khmu, Akha and Phounoy. Poverty rates are quite significant with 5 out of 7 districts below the poverty line and 65% of villages and 40.5% of families considered poor (2012).



Besides a considerable share of subsistence farming, agriculture and forestry (rice, maize, cardamom, tea, beans, banana, broomgrass, non-timber forest products etc.) are the main economic activities, producing largely for markets in China, Vietnam, neighboring provinces as well as the local market. Large companies are also engaged in mining (coal, copper, zinc) and forest logging. In addition, a considerable number of villages, including in Samphan and Mai, are involved in the illegal but highly profitable opium poppy cultivation.

Phongsaly is a mountainous area with a unique biodiversity and the meandering Nam Ou river as largest tributary of the Mekong river, running through its valleys. Hydropower development on the Nam Ou is on the rise with 7 dams planned or under construction.⁵ The forest coverage rate in Phongsaly is around 77% and protected areas include the Phou Den Din National Biodiversity Conservation Area (north-east bordering Vietnam, and covering the northern part of Samphan) and Nam Lan Conservation Area (west bordering China).

³ *Economic Profile of Phongsaly Province*. GIZ, December 2012 and NU PCR baseline findings.

⁴ For the original map in color, as well as other maps of the province and Mai and Samphan districts, see:

http://www.prf Laos.org/map/all?page=1&order=field_map_date&sort=asc

⁵ This obviously brings challenges in terms of disrupting river traffic, increased flood risks, resettlement issues, and pressures on the ecosystem. For a map of planned dams see: *Dams of Laos in the Mekong Basin*. CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food, 2013: https://wle-mekong.cgiar.org/download/map-repository/A4_Laos_Element.pdf?doing_wp_cron=1460087228.9871881008148193359375

3. Mid-Term Review objective and approach

This chapter discusses the ‘*what*’ and ‘*how*’ of the mid-term review (MTR), elaborating on the principal and specific objectives, overall approaches and applied methodologies. It is important to stress that the formative MTR was done concurrently with a baseline assessment, which is described in a separate report. Both baseline and MTR have been streamlined in terms of approach and methodology, and findings and recommendations should therefore be read together.

3.1 Objective

Half way through the project, the NU PCR project commissioned a formative MTR of project progress with the following **main objective**: *to assess efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of the project strategies towards achieving the overall objective to date, assess how the project is integrating gender and how this can be enhanced to transform unequal gender relations.*

3.2 Approach and methodology

Overall principles that guided the MTR were: participatory and inclusive; integration of gender; building staff capacity where possible and strengths-based rather than deficit or needs based.

Based on the Terms of Reference, initial desk review and further discussions with the project team, an MTR assessment framework was developed around key criteria such as: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, partnerships, and gender and women’s empowerment. Guiding questions per criterion were developed as follows:

3 – MTR: key assessment criteria and guiding questions	
<i>Relevance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the project design, intervention logic and implementation been appropriate to meet the needs of the target groups? To what extent have the project interventions been relevant given the context of climate, hazards and vulnerability? ▪ Does the project successfully reach out to addressing the needs of women, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups? How is feedback gathered from the beneficiaries on changing needs and relevance of project interventions? ▪ Do project stakeholders, incl. beneficiaries have a similar understanding of resilience? ▪ Has the project design been coherent with policies of the Government? What about priorities of the local authorities? To what extent is the project approach or model in line with or improving international and national best practice? ▪ What's the contribution of this project to CARE's larger EMW program? How does it benefit from previous achievements or processes?
<i>Effectiveness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are the planned results likely to be achieved and lead to the intended outcomes? ▪ Have the activities so far been effective to meet the needs of the targeted population? ▪ Which project activities have the greatest positive effect and which will have the least effect? Are there any activities that should have been included in the action but were not? What innovative approaches is the project applying? ▪ Are local authorities better informed about duties and responsibilities in risk management for climate change adaptation? Does the intervention strengthen capacities for climate change adaptation at the community level? ▪ How do women, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups benefit from the results? ▪ What are incentives and barriers for sustainability? What can be done already to achieve sustainability in the long run?
<i>Efficiency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are project funds being used in a cost efficient way ? ▪ Are resources allocated justified and adequate to strengthen capacity of the local

3 – MTR: key assessment criteria and guiding questions	
	<p>population, especially women, ethnic minorities etc.?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent is the management set-up effective? Are risks being monitored on a continuous basis, challenges timely identified and actions taken to overcome these?
<i>Partnerships</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How were partners selected? Was there a partner capacity assessment done and how? ▪ Does everyone share the same understanding of roles and responsibilities? Does (technical, management, human resources etc.) capacity match these? ▪ Has the project strategically addressed current capacity and needs? What are the long term strategies in terms of partnerships and capacity building?
<i>Gender and women's empowerment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How is the project's team and partners' understanding on gender and climate change? ▪ Are suggested responses or strategies to address this realistic, based on good practice? ▪ How does the project go beyond mere participation toward applying transformative approaches?

These were then matched with a variety of tools to collect the information needed. In terms of tools, the MTR applied the following mixed-method approach:

4 – Mid-term review methodology	
Desk review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ See under annexes for a list of documentation consulted;
Reflection workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ With junior Government officers (DAFO, DONRE and Lao Women Union, from Mai and Samphan), CARE and CCL staff; ▪ Group and plenary discussions ▪ Participatory exercises on community resilience, project approach and activities, effectiveness, sustainability, gender and women's empowerment;
Key informant interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 14 key informants from district Department of Agriculture and Forestry (DAFO), district Department of Natural resources and Environment (DONRE), CCL, SAEDA and CARE project staff and technical advisors; ▪ Questions around: major climate risks and impacts; Government policies and programs; gender and women's empowerment; good practice or lessons learned from previous initiatives; project logic, M&E and sustainability etc.
Knowledge, Attitude, Practice and Policy Mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agree/disagree/no opinion statements on climate change, Government planning based on climate information, livelihoods and gender; ▪ Mapping of Government policies and programs (name, objective, core activities, timeframe, location etc.).

Relevant data from the baseline survey, primarily collected through a household survey and focus group discussions (see the *NU PCR baseline report*), was also used for this MTR report.

The MTR team was led by the international consultant and comprised of an external translator cum research assistant, staff from CARE and CCL and junior Government officers from district DONRE, DAFO and the Lao Women Union. In-country preparation and data collection took place between 22nd February and 11th March. Translation of workshop and interview notes was done between 14th and 30th March; and analysis and report writing between the 1st and 15th April. Draft findings, including recommendations, were presented to CARE Denmark, CARE Laos, CCL and SAEDA at a debriefing meeting in Vientiane on the 11th March, and refined through several rounds of review mid-April.

Further details about the assessment framework, methodology, team composition as well as schedule can be found in the baseline and MTR assessment plan, see annex 2.

3.3 Limitations

A number of limitations have arisen that should be taken into account when reviewing the findings and recommendations:

- The three districts, fifteen villages as well as the households are very diverse in terms of assets, impacts of weather, climate and economic shocks and stresses, levels of adaptation and gender equality etc. which makes it challenging for this MTR as well as the project overall to identify general findings or recommendations without losing this diversity. However, the report reflects this properly and consistently stresses the need for customized rather than one-size-fits-all interventions;
- The MTR was conducted within a very strict timeframe, with limited back-up time. Therefore, the assessment workshop with the CCL team and Government representatives in Ngot Ou had to be cancelled. This was mitigated by extending the Key Informant Interviews with Government partners and by adding interviews with key implementation staff such as the project manager and field coordinator. This delivered adequate information to also properly evaluate progress in Ngot Ou district;
- As is common in similar contexts, it is challenging to work with different languages - English, Lao and a variety of ethnic languages – particularly within a limited timeframe. However, the entire team, including a dedicated translator, worked hard to make sure nuances were adequately translated, and ideas from communities and Government were properly reflected back to the international consultant. Still, information might have gotten 'lost in translation', in both directions.

FINDINGS



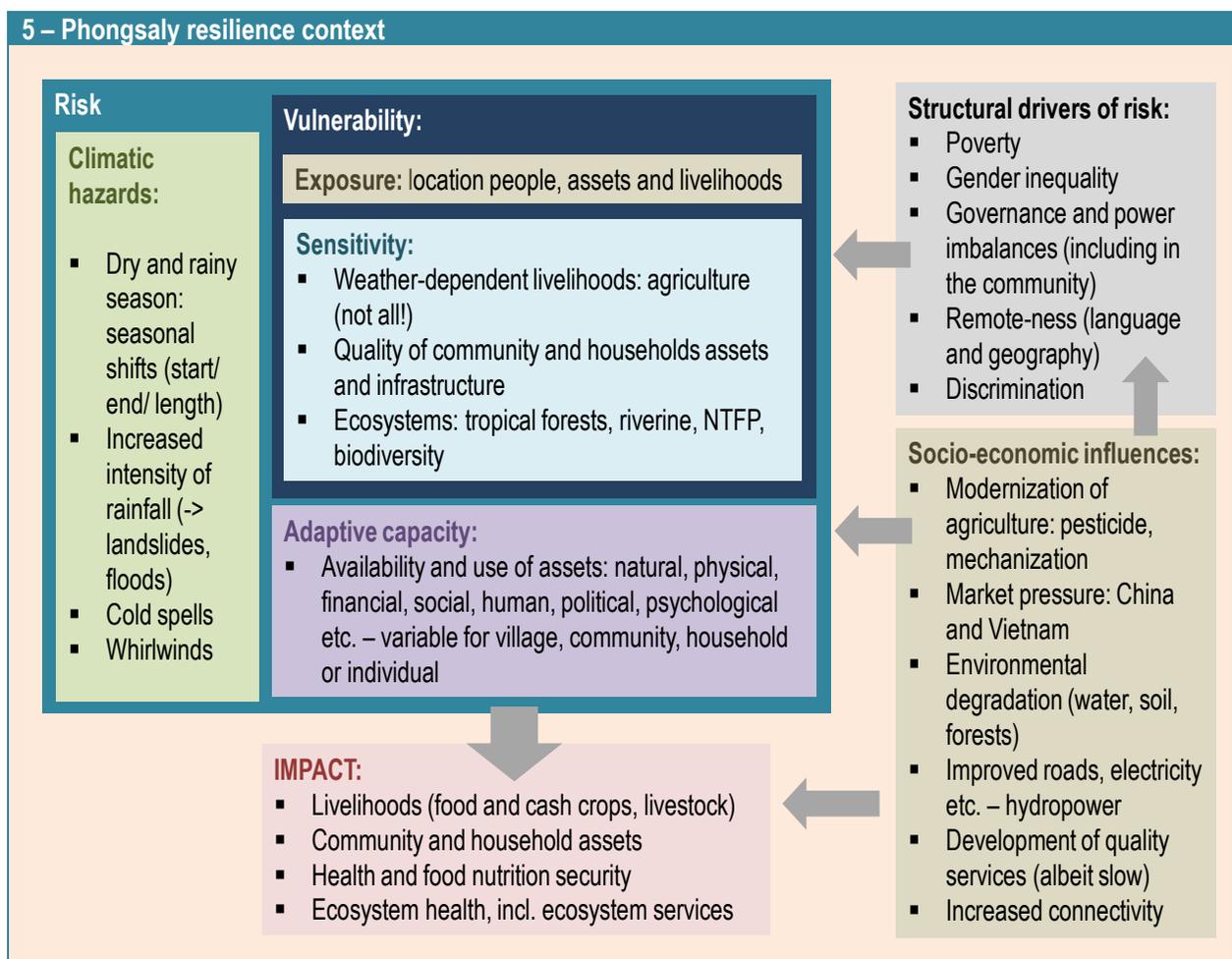
4. Relevance

To what extent is the NU PCR project appropriate to local and national priorities and needs? This chapter answers this question by looking at the climate risk and resilience context, and priority issues as identified by communities and Government partners. It compares this to the project design and implementation plan, and discusses if it adequately matches priorities and to what extent.

4.1 Phongsaly climate risk and resilience context

Weather and climate in Phongsaly increasingly become more unpredictable and erratic, with seasonal shifts in terms of start, end as well as length of rainy and dry seasons; increased intensity of rainfall leading to more floods and landslides; more severe droughts, cold spells and whirlwinds being the most threatening.

Within the vulnerability context of Phongsaly and variable for different levels of adaptive capacity, this impacts the most on livelihoods, community and household assets, health and food nutrition security, and ecosystem health. These climate risks and impacts are positively or negatively affected by the dynamic interaction with structural drivers of risk such as poverty, gender inequality, governance and power imbalances, as well as socio-economic influences like modernization of agriculture, market pressures, increased connectivity, environmental degradation or improved infrastructure and services. Altogether this makes for a complex resilience context (see figure below).



4.2 Community and Government priorities

4.2.1 Farmer observations

As highlighted in the NU PCR baseline and MTR reflection exercises, a key issue consistently identified by farmers is increased weather variability and unpredictability (including seasonal shifts and slow-onset stresses such as drought), with impact on crop yields and income. Short term disaster shocks (such as whirlwinds, landslides or hail) are considered as less challenging, lower impact and manageable (except for extreme rainfall):

In terms of **risks and impact**:

- Climatic hazards most severely affect farmer's health and livelihoods (crops, livestock and trees), and to a lesser extent but also community infrastructure (roads, irrigation, bridges);
- While livelihoods and human health are more impacted by shifting seasons, drought and extreme temperatures; infrastructure is more affected by severe weather events such as heavy rainfall, storms or whirlwinds, landslides but also drought;
- Crops most affected are upland and paddy rice, coffee, not-shaded cardamom, fruit trees, and NTFPs benzoin, oily climber and Job's tears. Less but still affected are maize, forest cardamom, bamboo and galangal, while the least affected are tea and broomgrass;
- While livestock is also impacted, it is more likely due to diseases and lack of vaccination than actually caused by weather or hazards. Still, most clearly impacting livestock are cold spells, heavy rainfall or storms;
- Perceived impact on ecosystems is primarily due to human intervention: farmers identify a decreasing trend in terms of amount, size or quantity of natural resources such as fish, forests, NTFPs and water with main reasons given: slash-and-burn; tree cutting; more cash crops grown which reduced forests; more NTFPs collected because of higher commercial value; uncoordinated NTFP harvesting, limited conservation; more invasive fishing; and overall population increase.
- Market pressures, including unpredictable or unreliable trader relationships and price volatility, are non-climatic pressures most frequently mentioned by farmers as strongly influencing livelihood plans, yields and incomes.

In terms of **adaptation strategies and needs**:

- Overall levels of adaptive capacity have considerably improved over the last five years, but are generally still low (Mai) to medium (Samphan and Ngot Ou); which includes ownership and use of productive and non-productive assets, access to markets, use of weather and agricultural information for livelihoods, and application of other good farming practice;
- Some agricultural inputs are more used than available and therefore have to be purchased outside the village: vaccines (all); tools or machines (Samphan); chemical fertilizer and water equipment (Ngot Ou), animal traps (Samphan); and bio-fertilizer (Mai). Seeds, water for crops or livestock, fodder, rice mills, building material for cages and farming labor are available in the villages for the farmers who use them;
- Loan use is higher in Ngot Ou and Mai compared to Samphan, with most loans in Ngot Ou through extended family while in Mai through the Government;⁶
- A small minority of farmers in the three project districts does: improved water storage and irrigation; agroforestry; preventive vaccination; community forest protection; farmer peer-to-peer learning (for example through groups); and changing seed varieties, seasonal calendars or farming techniques. However, there are examples of 'model farmers or villages' to use as examples across the province;⁷

⁶ A loan can bring benefits to households (access to small-scale finance, space to take more risks, lesser need to sell household assets, influence on financial decision-making if the loan is on the woman's name, release pressure on boys and girls to help raise income so they can stay in school etc.) but can also be a burden (financially, socially as well as psychosocially). This depends on a number of factors (for example loan modalities, number of loans per household, formal or informal, repayment flexibility, gender issues etc.) which should be assessed more in-depth and on a case by case basis. As this was beyond the scope of the NU PCR baseline assessment, further research is required.

⁷ For more detailed percentages per action taken, see the NU PCR baseline assessment.

- There is a high demand for timely and downscaled weather forecasts - via TV -, and farming advice (cardamom, rice and livestock) – via the loudspeaker, face-to-face through the village leader, NGOs or extension workers;
- Farmers are most interested in training on livestock rearing (including disease prevention), rice and vegetables production, and disaster preparedness and prevention. There is also considerable interest in training on contract farming and dealing with traders; NTFP processing and marketing; farmer group management and natural resources management;

Structural drivers of risk most mentioned by farmers are:

- Poverty –variable access to resources, including information and training;
- Language - low levels of literacy as well as understanding and use of Lao;
- Gender inequality - in terms of household decision-making, access to training, participation in public meetings, division of farm and non-farm labor, and mobility of women constrained to in or near the village;

Also here, significant improvement have been witnessed by farmers over the last years, especially in terms of; access to assets such as electricity, clean water for drinking, machines and phones; improved connectivity (and outside influence and information) through road construction as well as increased mobility (but mostly men); more gender balanced workload than before in terms of agricultural roles and responsibilities and use of productive assets (due to need for more income), improved food security and health (more for men than women).

4.2.2 National and local Government priorities

The National Strategy on Climate Change (NSCC) of Lao PDR was approved in early 2010 and states a vision on how to address climate change: *'to secure a future where Lao PDR is capable of mitigating and adapting to changing climatic conditions in a way that promotes sustainable economic development, reduces poverty, protects public health and safety, enhances the quality of Lao PDR's natural environment, and the quality of life for all Lao People.'*⁸ In addition to this overarching strategy, a national Climate Change Action Plan for the period 2013-2020 defines mitigation and adaptation actions in the sectors of agriculture, forestry, land use change, water resources, energy, transportation, industry and public health. Lao PDR also has a Strategic Plan on Disaster Risk Management (SPDRM), adopted in 2003 and currently in its 3rd phase of implementation (2010-2020).⁹ The cross-ministerial National Disaster Management Committee (NDMC), with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) as the secretariat, oversees the overall implementation of climate policy and action in the country.

The 4 priorities under the sectoral Plan of Action for DRM in Agriculture (2014-2016) are:¹⁰

- Assessing and monitoring climate risks and vulnerabilities, and issuing early warning for food and nutrition security and transboundary threats;
- Improving knowledge management, awareness raising and education on DRM, climate change impacts and adaptation;
- Reducing underlying risks and vulnerabilities by promoting technical options and community-based planning for DRM/CCA in the agriculture sector;
- Enhancing capacities, facilities and procedures for effective disaster preparedness and response, and integrate climate change adaptation in recovery initiatives.

Guiding principles in this Action Plan highlight, among other; prioritizing smallholders and the most vulnerable; applying landscape and agro-ecosystem approaches; ensuring equal participation of stakeholders and communities in planning and implementation; inter-sectoral collaboration; and information sharing and public awareness.

Other priorities in terms of climate change for the wider agricultural sector are:¹¹

⁸ Available here: http://www.la.undp.org/content/lao_pdr/en/home/library/environment_energy/climate_change_strategy.html

⁹ The country is also developing a Climate Change and Disaster Law, expected to be approved in 2017.

¹⁰ Available here: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-at540e.pdf>

- Efficient water management and watershed protection: soil erosion control, contour planting, irrigation, pond, flood-resilient farming, watershed and groundwater protection;
- Forest and trees: forest protection, agroforestry, seed banks and nurseries, home and school gardens, industrial trees (coffee, cacao, rubber etc.);
- Soil fertility improvement: increase legumes, trees and biomass, on-farm fodder production, bio-fertilizers;
- Supply chain management; improve post-harvest handling, marketing and local trade
- Credit and finance.

However, significant institutional and policy gaps exist: lack of understanding at local and community level of roles and responsibilities – with limited exchange between national and provincial level and across departments; limited resources and expertise within the national and local offices in charge of DRM and climate change; lack of comprehensive land development policy framework; ineffective enforcement of laws particularly on land concession, conversion, chemicals and environmentally friendly agriculture; need for more up-to-date data holdings of climate information and research capacity; limited on-the-ground experience or evidence on good practice; and overall low levels of public awareness on climate change issues.¹²

In terms of gender, Lao PDR has a legislative framework that ensures protection of equal rights of women and men to land and other property, equal pay for equal work and non-discrimination. Gender equality is a cross-cutting criterion in the Decree and Plan on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (2011-2015), and a National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (2011-2015) stresses awareness raising on gender equality, promotion of women's rights and women in leadership roles.

Phongsaly province has a climate change action plan and more than 10 specific programs on agriculture and food security (including on DRM, irrigation, fisheries, border trade, livestock, vaccination and other extension services), with variable but generally low to medium levels of implementation. Within these programs, priority crops are coffee, cardamom, tea, maize, vegetables and NTFPs and an overall shift away from upland rice. If a disaster happens, the province supports farmers (although not consistently across all districts and villages) with early warning, rice and advice on replanting.

While the districts have no specific policies relevant for DRM or climate change, district government priorities as mentioned by Mai, Samphan and Ngot Ou DONRE and DAFO, are:

- Crop (and livestock) protection techniques;
- Land use planning, forest protection and management;
- Weather observation and dissemination, disaster early warning – particularly for rainfall and drought;
- Management of natural resources and ecosystems;
- Reduction of chemical fertilizer and pesticides;
- Disaster preparedness and response planning;

4.3 Project design and coherence with the above priorities

The NU-PCR project design is largely based on CARE's community-based adaptation approach (*see figure below*) as well as previous project experience of CARE, CCL and SAEDA on livelihoods, nutrition and food security, natural resources management, farmer social capital and gender. Its two-pronged approach to resilience focuses on addressing 'adaptive deficits' (or low adaptive capacity) in the short and medium term, while at the same time working in partnership with local authorities and civil society to ensure support or systems for long term resilience.

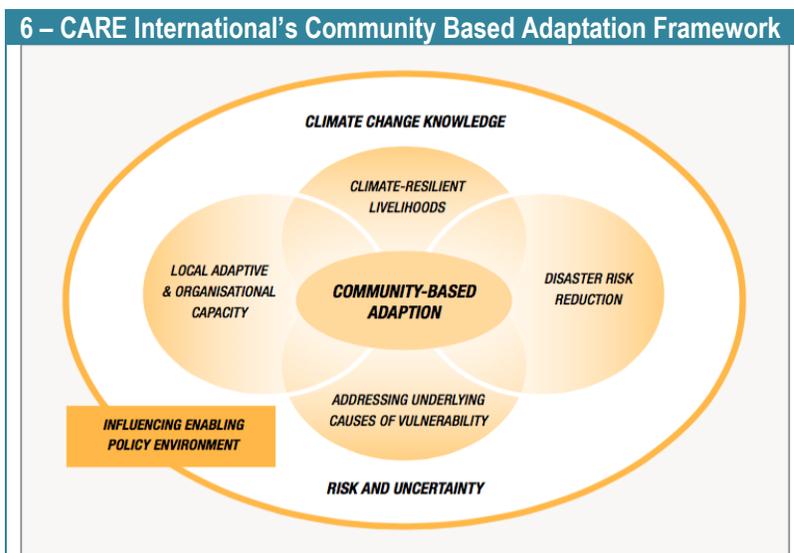
¹¹ Status of climate change adaptation in the agriculture sector for Lao PDR. DDMCC, May 2014.

See: http://www.chr-khr.org/sites/default/files/chreventdocuments/part_4_2_lao_pdr.pdf

¹² This paragraph combines information from the action plans, MTR assessment findings as well as Lao PDR's very recent Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) submission to the UNFCCC (see: <http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/Laos/1/Lao%20PDR%20INDC.pdf>).

Gender inequality, variable access to resources and inadequate natural resources management are recognized as underlying factors of vulnerability to climate and non-climate shocks and stresses. These need to be challenged and structurally ‘transformed’ to truly achieve resilience.

The design adequately identifies the complex resilience context as experienced by communities and local authorities, including pertinent underlying drivers of vulnerability as well as a number of other non-climate socio-economic pressures. It is consistent with farmer needs for livelihood protection and diversification, access and use of credit, techniques and climate and non-climate information, and entrenched gender issues. It is strongly in line with national and local Government priorities, such as on livelihood resilience and agro-climate information, disaster preparedness and response, credit, community-based planning and local or public awareness. It also significantly responds to a need for Government capacity building and research and learning on what adaptation or resilience means in practice for Phongsaly and Lao PDR.



The NU PCR project is also integrated with other existing projects in the area such as the CARE ‘*Strengthening local health systems*’ project and ‘*Women Organized for Rural Development*’ (WORD) project. Although there is overlap for these projects in terms of villages, beneficiaries as well as project activities on livelihoods, markets, community groups and gender, all projects are adequately coordinated to ensure coherence, mutually reinforcing interventions and cross-learning. In addition, the NU PCR project is in line with and contributing to CARE Lao PDR’s overall Remote Ethnic Women (REW) Program priorities and indicators, CCL’s Program Strategy and SAEDA’s 4 core programs of intervention on sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation, food safety, and farmer organizations.¹³

As the resilience context is in a constant flux and for the purpose of accountability towards beneficiaries and project partners, it is important to establish a regular but independent feedback, complaint or reflection mechanism. This in combination with adaptive project management will ensure that the project is adequately addressing existing and changing needs of beneficiaries; communities as well as local authorities. While input from Government partners is collected through the regular project management meetings, the project has yet to identify the most appropriate mechanism to gather feedback from communities. However, this is very challenging and existing experience with hotlines, notice boards and suggestion boxes, for example under the Poverty Reduction Fund-program, have not been very effective. An entry point for the NU PCR project might be through the supported CVCA, farmer groups or logbooks, but should be further developed based on available national and international good practice.

5. Effectiveness

How is the project faring in terms of project implementation and contributing to achieving the project’s planned results? This sections looks at the project logic that informs implementation, the current implementation progress or status, how risks are management, and how sustainability can already be addressed.

¹³ For more details, see www.ccl-laos.org and saeda.net

5.1 Re-orientation of project logic to harmonize activities

Even though the design provides an accurate analysis of the resilience context and rightly stresses institutional capacity building and addressing underlying causes of vulnerability, it responds to this context with the same level of complexity, much ambition but limited prioritization, particularly on building community resilience;

- 'Resilient livelihood models for scaling up' should aim to address, across all districts, a broad range of interconnected themes; climate change resilience, agricultural production and marketing, access to land, gender and women's empowerment, natural resources management, disaster risk reduction, good governance and rights-based approaches;
- These models will be comprised of no-regret agricultural productivity improvements combined with VSLA, agro-weather information and a limited number of DRR measures (with emphasis on disaster risk management and improving a selection of the 'Characteristics of a Disaster-Resilient Community'¹⁴). Although recognized, farmer livelihood and resilience decision-making processes (and support tools) are insufficiently stressed and the main focus is on more traditional livelihood support through agricultural training packages;
- The project design is inconsistent whether it allows piloting or not in terms of agricultural support, although resilience is all about trial-and-error, innovating and learning. Even though result 2 directly mentions 'pilot interventions', in the result description it stresses that '*the project will not be piloting individual agriculture activities. Instead the project will apply effective practices and lessons learned from previous and ongoing projects in Phongsaly*'. This encourages pre-defined interventions in a context where much still has to be learned about CBA and resilience;
- Community resilience activities are guided by a multitude of criteria, some result-focused and others informed by project implementation modalities, such as: demonstrating 'meaningful' results within the project timeframe; feasible within the project resources; based on existing project implementers' capacity and experience; supporting local authorities' policies and planning; endorsement by the Government; responding to community needs as in the CBA plans; reducing women's workloads; no-regret; and benefiting the most vulnerable like women headed households, the elderly and people with a disability. It's unclear how all these criteria are prioritized or applied;
- In addition, the awareness raising approach as described in the design is primarily focused on information provision (for example via campaigns, posters, public events etc.), where it should be equally targeting more impactful and sustainable communication for behavioral change (even though this again requires a high intervention dose and M&E).

In terms of timeframe, the three key results – enhanced institutional capacity, community resilience and policy change – and crosscutting issues such as gender equity and social justice can only be partially achieved within a four year project timeframe. Therefore, an urgent streamlining and prioritization of project interventions and resources will make the project more realistic and deliver stronger and more meaningful contributions towards some of these results rather than trying to deliver a little on all.

Realizing these inherent design challenges and taking into account local capacities, the project implementation team – with facilitation from CARE Denmark and an international consultant - has recently initiated a number of measures to simplify and harmonize some of the project approaches and intended results and reach a shared understanding. In addition to applying proven M&E tools such as outcome mapping and progress markers, the team has developed a practical operational framework for addressing resilience. This was based on international good practice¹⁵ and the project's existing M&E plan, and comprises of the following:

¹⁴ See: *Characteristics of a Disaster Resilient Community*. Twigg, J., 2009

¹⁵ A recently conducted assessment of 17 internationally recognized climate and disaster resilience frameworks or sets of indicators for resilience highlights three recurring key dimensions of resilience: 1/ information and learning; 2/ choice and options; and 3/ flexibility and self-regulation. The disaster resilience framework suggested in the NU PCR project design under specific objective indicator 4 is one of the frameworks that was also included in this assessment. See: *A comparative overview of resilience measurement frameworks. Analyzing indicators and approaches*. ODI Working Paper 422, 2015.

7 – NU PCR project dimensions on resilience			
	1. Proportion of farmers demonstrating long term livelihood planning, informed by weather info		2. Joint decision-making between men and women about household farming decisions
	3. Level of household's disaster preparedness or prevention		4. Proportion of farmers receiving information or support from external stakeholders for dealing with weather and hazards: Govt.; companies, NGOs
	5. Level of livelihood diversification; food crops, cash crops, and processing agricultural produce		6. Asset ownership: electricity, clean water, phone, television, radio, bicycle, motorbike etc.
	7. Availability of natural resources: NTFPs; forest; river fish; (tap) water		8. Proportion of farmers receiving information or support from farmer or community groups for dealing with weather and hazards
	9. Proportion of farmers recovering from weather or hazard impact on livelihoods after one season or less		10. Level of damage or loss, on livelihoods, community infrastructure (roads, irrigation) and human health

These ten dimensions were successfully applied in focus group discussions with women and men farmers during the baseline survey and delivered comprehensive information to inform customized and more prioritized support per village and district.¹⁶ It also showcased strong potential to be adapted to a regular participatory M&E tool.

Further work is planned on integrating various dimensions of women's empowerment with the aim of truly promoting or contributing to 'gender transformative' resilience (see *NU PCR baseline report and section on gender*). Parallel efforts should also be undertaken to properly value and address ethnic minority issues, not only through awareness raising and more visual participatory tools, but also through actions for empowerment, similarly as with gender.

5.2 Current implementation progress

Overall, the project implementation is slightly off-track with a delay of ten to twelve months. This is mostly due to a lengthy process for getting the Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Lao signed (March to December 2014) (not uncommon in Lao PDR), capacity limitations on climate change, the complexity of the project topic and approaches, and the deliberate but right decision to invest in CVCA for CBA capacity building and developing quality (above quantity) interventions. Still, all partners agree that project beneficiary and activity targets will be achieved and that the project will be back on track before the end of this year, with result 2 activities already accelerating at the time of the MTR. At this stage, the project has contributed the most to: increased individual (not yet Government institutional) capacity, awareness about weather variability and climate change, a comprehension of the Phongsaly risk context and documentation.

In addition to setting up the project and partnerships and mobilizing the implementation capacity, the first phase of the NU PCR project substantially invested in **collaborative climate risk analysis and planning through CVCA** as core component of result 1. Both the CVCA as well as participatory methodologies in general were rather new in Phongsaly, so significant time and experimentation was needed to fully grasp and apply this process. Challenges as mentioned by the team were: complex technical aspects of climate change, insufficient data available or information generated through CVCA to inform project planning, translating CVCA results into actual plans, community plans becoming 'normal' development rather than actual resilience plans, limited integration of gender, and the CVCA

¹⁶ To reflect diversity, the NU PCR is not addressing or prioritizing every dimension in the same way in each village or household. While some common interventions will be applied, others should be village or district-specific.

process requiring a lot of resources in terms of staff and time.¹⁷ However, through incremental on-the-job learning and bringing in additional analysis (for example through market opportunity studies, livelihood research, NTFP inventory and expert visits¹⁸), the process was successfully finalized delivering intended results. Most importantly, all partners recognize that although it was a lengthy process, significant capacity of the implementation team as well as the Government technical officers was built on climate change, CBA as well as participatory methodologies. However, more work remains to be done to improve the process and maintain capacities; linking it better to Government planning, fully integrating gender and governance issues, and be less information-extractive and more a process owned by the communities and Government for planning.

Progress has been slower in terms of the **result 2 community resilience** activities. Although some activities have already been initiated such as the establishment of farmer groups and women groups (for VSLA), direct provision of agricultural input (cardamom, tea, fish and fruit trees – mainly in Ngot Ou) and a number of training events on contract farming, livestock herbal medicine and VSLA, the focus has primarily been on researching a variety of CBA support options. Besides information from CVCA, market opportunity studies and expert analysis, the recently conducted baseline survey also produced valuable information for strategic decision-making and prioritization on result 2 activities. As many of the community resilience activities need a significant intervention dose and time to achieve impact, urgent action is required on result 2, particularly on agro-climate information, self-sustained farmer groups or cooperatives, behavioral change and large scale alternative options to upland rice (such as Sloping Agricultural Land Technique, rice terracing, agro-forestry).

While small-scale livelihood support is important as ‘quick wins’ to gain and maintain farmer and Government interest, these need to be gradually phased out to focus on the more impactful interventions in terms of long term climate resilience. Livelihood support needs to target improved and informed farmer decision-making and livelihood planning - for example through decision support tools such as cost benefit analysis, inter-cropping options inventory, price volatility measurement, market surveying, seed selection, optimal temperature etc. - instead of the more traditional livelihood hand-outs. In addition, the project needs to ensure that trainings are part of a comprehensive livelihood strategy rather than one-off events.

Regarding **result 3**, the project has started **documenting** the first experience on CVCA and planning, livelihood research and policy mapping. These have yet to be finalized for wider dissemination but will already contribute to the CBA evidence base in Lao PDR. In terms of policy and **advocacy**, the project conducted a policy mapping and analysis but still has to define priority issues and a strategy for advocacy (integrating project documentation). As impact on advocacy takes a long time to achieve, the project needs to urgently select a number of key topics, and engage Vientiane-based as well as global expertise.

Besides more traditional **M&E** through activity tracking and regular reporting, the project has also done a number of partner workshops on outcome mapping, agreeing on the changes the project would like to see for each key group of stakeholders (including farmer groups). Outcome mapping has been appreciated by the partners, but needs a thorough and continuous follow-up to remain effective. M&E needs to engage farmers or communities, and ideas in that regard – for example through a tool for farmer group’s self-assessment of capacity - are also being discussed.

¹⁷ Challenges similar as in other countries. For valuable lessons on CVCA, see: *Understanding Vulnerability to Climate Change. Insights from Application of CARE’s Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis (CVCA) Methodology*. CARE International, 2011. <http://careclimatechange.org/publications/understanding-vulnerability/> and other CVCA reports on the same website.

¹⁸ NU PCR also applied a CARE Vietnam resilient livelihood monitoring tool, for identifying, assessing, prioritizing and M&E of livelihoods.

8 – Project implementation progress tracker							
Project activities:	Hasn't started	Level of progress: ¹⁹					Description of activity progress:
		--	-	+ -	+	++	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Result 1:							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt CVCA, develop training package and organize training for partners; 					X		Built on CARE global good practice and technical support, but need for further adjustment of methodology to NU PCR context, planning process, for annual updating and with better integration of gender
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake CVCA process, incl. community and expert validation of results; 					X		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate CVCA results into village and district development plans; 			X				Integration only recently completed, and only in one district
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify target villages and strengthen village leadership; 			X				30 villages identified, and comprehensive village profiles being compiled. No activities yet implemented on village leadership or good governance, except for SAEDA training CARE staff on leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design CBA actions for result 2 activities; 				X			Project furthest in developing and prioritizing comprehensive list of resilient livelihood options, with implementation about to start. DRR, agro-climate information and awareness raising currently being discussed, but interventions still unclear. VSLA and farmer group support initiated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed IEC/training package for agriculture interventions; 				X			SAEDA currently modifying and finalizing agricultural training packages, including tools. First training on 'herbal medicine for chickens' provided in Ngot Ou
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CC awareness raising and capacity building on key themes; 		X					Ideas being discussed, but no comprehensive or strategic awareness raising carried out yet. Capacity building so far focused on CVCA
Result 2:							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmer group establishment or strengthening; 			X				Mixed male/female farmer groups set up, but no on-going training or other activities with the groups yet. Activities being discussed with Govt. partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver agricultural training package for farmer groups; 				X			Training on contract farming done for all villages (through TOT). SAEDA currently improving and finalizing other agricultural training packages, including tools. Agricultural inputs provided (cardamom, fruit trees, tea, fish ponds, mushroom), mainly in Ngot Ou but also more recently in Samphan and Mai
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vouchers: link farmers to agri input sellers; 			X				Designed, not yet fully implemented. Pilot to start in May 2016.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness raising and community-led resilience measures, incl. DRR; 		X					Awareness raising and DRR currently being discussed, but interventions still not finalized. DRR focal points appointed in each village, however with unclear roles and responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based 	X						Technical assessment mission conducted in

¹⁹ As collaboratively assessed by Government partners, CARE, CCL and the international consultant, through reflective exercises.

8 – Project implementation progress tracker							
Project activities:	Hasn't started	Level of progress: ¹⁹					Description of activity progress:
		--	-	+ -	+	++	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	
agro-climate information services;							December 2015 to assess current state, including gaps, of the agro-climate information system. ²⁰ Since then, no specific activity developed yet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VSLA groups targeted at women; 				X			Women groups for VSLAs set up, but currently only 3 (with final plan aimed at 10). VSLA learning visit to CARE Vietnam conducted in March 2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved farmer value chain linkages; 	X						
Result 3:							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project monitoring and evaluation, including logbooks and participatory M&E; 				X			Project M&E system centred around logframe and outcome mapping. Regular reporting done. Logbooks and participatory M&E tools not yet designed, except for a farmer group capacity assessment tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baseline and end-line assessment; 					X		Baseline assessment conducted in March-April 2016, with strong focus on food security, livelihood productivity and resilience, and gender
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formative MTR, end-of-project evaluation; 					X		Mid-term review conducted in March-April 2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning tours for farmers ea.; 			X				Learning tours done on: cardamom processing, VSLA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing and implementing project advocacy strategy; 			X				Climate change and DRR policy mapping or research carried out, but advocacy topics or plan not yet developed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Documentation contributing to global CCA knowledge base. 			X				Following documentation is in development, but not yet finalized for publication or widely disseminated: policy mapping, CVCA reports, market opportunity studies, NTFP inventory and baseline survey

5.3 Risk management

A combination of internal and external risks and mitigation actions were identified in the project design. Although a number of these are beyond the control of the project (change in Government staff, market stability, agricultural product price volatility, resettlement) the design affirms these can be mitigated. Risks that have a potential impact on the project but that have been omitted are: novelty and complexity of the topic and limited availability of local technical capacity, one year livelihood cycles allowing less time for testing or replication, and building a new implementation partnership requiring significant resources (including time) for coordination.

Although risk monitoring is a crucial component of adaptive project management and can be integrated into project M&E and reporting without creating much additional work, it hasn't been applied yet by the project team. For a project dealing with climate resilience and a number of other challenges, this needs to improve urgently.

5.4 Foundations for sustainability

Sustainability needs to be considered ideally from the start of the project, but particularly once the project is halfway. The design already identified a number of actions or approaches to increase sustainability: Phongsaly-specific resilience planning and livelihood guidelines co-developed with the Government; self-sustained farmer groups supported by improved extension services and trader relationships; support to livelihoods that have strong (niche)

²⁰ See: *Climate Change Adaptation Technical Support mission to CARE Laos - report*. Miguel Coulier, December 2015.

market potential as well as environmental co-benefits; alignment with Government policies and programs; and targeted advocacy through for example national working groups to increase replication.

At the time of the MTR, partners identified additional enabling factors for sustainability the project should keep addressing on an on-going basis, mostly highlighting community and Government ownership in terms of livelihoods as well as project implementation. Most of these the project is already applying:

- Community ownership, with community members deciding themselves what they want to do and how;
- CVCA and resilience planning need to be useful for farmers themselves, and not only for the project;
- Farmer groups being more than project delivery mechanisms, so providing direct and long term benefits for women as well as men farmers;
- Livelihood support across the value chain, from production to processing to selling;
- Applying a comprehensive training approach, not as a one off event, but through incremental capacity improvement and monitoring before completely handing over;
- Government partners engaged in conducting market research;
- Government partners strongly involved in project M&E through setting up a team of M&E focal points;
- Developing a plan for strategic (rather than ad hoc) capacity building of Government partners;
- Doing enough research or assessment before implementing activities to understand needs and priorities;
- Government commits resources or support beyond the project.

Most of these measures need systematic follow-up for them to be effective. This is a joint responsibility, including of the Government partners, and can easily be integrated into the project M&E and reporting. A regular discussion or stocktaking on sustainability can also be integrated in the Project Steering Committee meeting.

6. Efficiency

How is the NU PCR project utilizing and allocating its available resources (funds, capacity) for effective implementation of the project? Is the partnership set-up and functioning contributing to this? This section looks at planned versus current expenditures, the partnership establishment, roles and responsibilities and technical capacities.

6.1 Expenditures

Due to a late finalization of the project Memorandum of Understanding and a focus on CVCA and other analysis, which do not require considerable budget, project expenditure is currently low, with a 34% burn rate. Burn rates are as expected for Result 1, HR and other costs, while lower for Result 2 and 3. However, this should change considerably in 2016 with implementation of Result 2 activities accelerating. Expenditure for result 3 is also expected to increase in the second part of the project.

Since the project is implemented in various locations and through a partnership, requiring significant resources (including time) for coordination and implementation, expenditures on travel and per diems are high. This is expected to continue for the rest of the project.

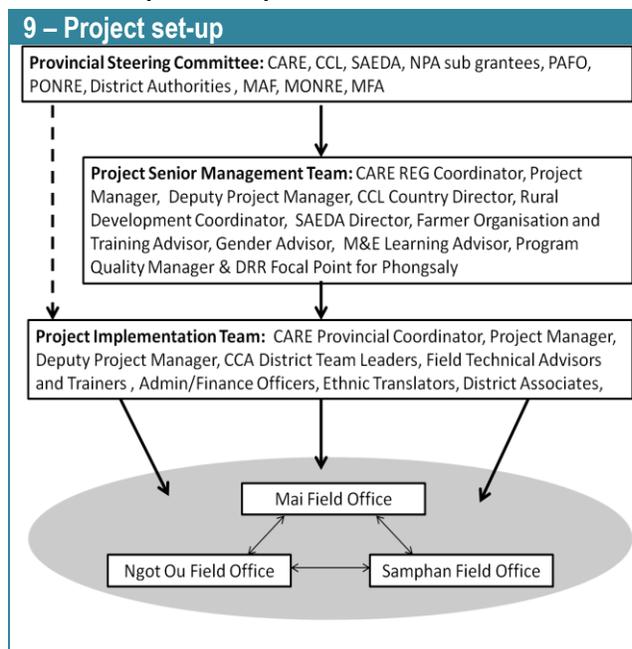
The project is piloting an innovative voucher system to engage farmers directly in procuring livelihood support. Through this, farmers themselves conduct market research and select the most appropriate and cost-beneficial agricultural inputs, increasing ownership. The system is at its initial stage so cannot be evaluated yet.

6.2 Project set-up and partnership

6.2.1 Roles and responsibilities

The NU PCR project is implemented through a new **multi-stakeholder partnership**, with one lead international NGO (CARE Lao PDR), one smaller international NGO implementing partner (CCL), a local NGO (SAEDA) and one Government partner, the Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment (PONRE); through the following set-up (see figure).

Partners and their roles and responsibilities were mainly selected and defined in line with their technical background or expertise, geography (CARE-Mai and Samphan, and CCL-Ngot Ou) and Government mandates (PONRE in charge of climate change). SAEDA and CARE already collaborated before in a food security project (starting one year before NU PCR), while CCL and SAEDA in a rural development project. CARE and CCL did not work together yet before the NU PCR project, but were part of a large development partners' consortium promoting a Livelihood Agriculture Nutrition and Natural Resource Management (LANN) approach across the country.



PONRE as the main Government partner, is chairing the Steering Committee, and provides technical expertise on land use planning, forest protection and natural resources management, contributes to project M&E and reporting, and is coordinating other Government offices involved in the project such as DAFO and the Lao Women Union. DAFO is providing technical support on livelihoods and agriculture, and the Lao Women Union is in charge of the credit activities and support to the gender equality and women's empowerment activities. All Government partners well understand and accept these different roles and responsibilities, but also recognize the more limited capacity of DONRE as a recently established department, with DAFO clearly being stronger when it concerns the main issues the project aims to address such as resilient farming systems.

6.2.2 Partnership functioning

Inherently, partnerships, especially new ones, need time to grow to be fully effective. This is the case for NU PCR. Where partners worked together before or are more equal in terms of size and mandate, collaboration is working well, for example between CCL and SAEDA, or between CARE and Mai/Samphan DAFO and the Lao Women Union. Where they are new (for example CARE with SAEDA or CCL) or imbalanced in terms of local technical expertise (DONRE vs. DAFO) or size (CARE vs. SAEDA or CCL), it requires time to adapt to each other's way of working and role in the project. SAEDA not being physically present in Phongsaly, so having less direct exchange with the implementation teams, also seems to slow down the quick establishment of a more effective partnership.²¹

Other points to improve in terms of the partnership functioning are:

- High frequency of meetings, including Project Steering Committee, with need for more efficiency, coordination and space for in-depth technical discussions;

²¹ Among the partners, opinions differ on this point. While some say this is not a significant issue or hindering the project implementation, others believe it affects the delivery, M&E and effectiveness of SAEDA's technical expertise. The confusion about SAEDA's role in the project needs to be clarified soon to create the right expectations about their support.

- More involvement requested of Government technical staff in project M&E, with required safeguards in terms of NGO's independency from Government;
- Need for more strategic engagement with senior level within DAFO, DONRE and also the provincial level, particularly on policy;
- Need for more strategic capacity building of Government, for example through a capacity building plan and regular capacity self-assessments to track improvements;
- Low frequency (and short length) of exchange between Ngot Ou, Mai and Samphan technical staff, including Government staff;

The CARE Northern Program Coordinator and CCL Rural Development Coordinator play a very conducive role in facilitating collaboration and creating a partnership mindset and practice, but more work needs to be done with the other national and international staff in Phongsaly but also Vientiane to better understand roles and responsibilities, establish a balanced and collaborative way of working and act in a partnership way. Government's contribution to the project, junior as well as senior, needs to be gradually expanded to increase ownership and sustainability. Altogether, the NU PCR partnership is going in the right direction and has already informed the set-up of partnerships for other projects in the pipeline, such as on nutrition. With some targeted improvements, it is expected to keep growing and in the long run be more than the sum of its parts.

5.2.2 Technical capacity

The very ambitious project requires a sizeable implementation team with a strong technical understanding of a variety of issues (climate change and resilience, agricultural production and marketing, food security, gender, natural resources management, savings and loans, policy advocacy etc.). At the time of the MTR, important capacity gaps have yet to be filled in more permanently and the current size of the team needs to increase to the expected number as per the design.

The available technical experience or expertise within the project team is primarily on: sustainable agricultural development, protection of natural resources, gender equality and women's empowerment, community development (including working with ethnic minorities), coordination with Government technical staff, reporting, financial management and project management. Important gaps are: climate change, agroforestry and agro-ecology, landscape management, climate information services, policy and advocacy, and analytical skills. A particular risk is the lack of in-depth climate change knowledge and skills, even though external experts (from in and outside the organizations) are providing support and the entire team is on a steep learning curve. However, for a project centered on resilience, this is an urgent issue to resolve. Involving a research institute or research-for-development organization (for example the MAF National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute or one of the CGIAR organizations), on a short or long term basis, should have been properly considered during the design or project establishment phase, but can still be a solution to overcome this gap. Another aspect that needs to improve is better coordinated and long term technical support from the CARE Vientiane office to the colleagues in Phongsaly, particularly on gender, climate change and DRR (using M&E and financial management support as a current good practice).

In addition, the partnership is also an opportunity to improve each other's capacity. For example, CCL and SAEDA are eager to learn from CARE on gender (beyond mainstreaming), M&E and working with ethnic minorities, while CARE staff wants to learn more from the others about agriculture product processing and marketing as well as community based natural resources management. A more strategic staff capacity building plan with proper implementation and follow-up can help to make these efforts more coordinated or organized.

7. Gender and women's empowerment

There is a genuine interest and commitment among the implementation team as well as the Government partners to work on gender and address underlying drivers of vulnerability. The project team has been trained on gender, a

preliminary Gender Action Plan is in draft form, a local gender advisor was recently recruited and gender progress tracking is integrated as part of the regular reporting. If the intended results on gender are achieved, a strong contribution will be made to the CARE REW Program but also to the increasingly expanding international discussions and evidence base on addressing gender equality within resilience.

Overall, Government partners²² see a significant improvement on gender over the last five years, mainly in terms of women's participation in household and public decision-making, improved sharing of information due to better literacy and education, improved financial literacy, increased mobility of women due to improved road access, and more women in Government leadership or senior positions.

10 – Improvements and priorities on gender equality identified by Government partners

A selection of statements from Key Informant Interviews:

“The situation on gender equality is better than in the past, mainly because of education. More women participate in community meetings, share their ideas and help making decisions. Even in the Government there are more women in higher positions. For example in my department, the vice-head is a woman.” (Mai DAFO)

“Not only do women participate more, they also discuss and share information. Financial literacy has also improved.” (Ngot Ou DAFO)

“Although the situation has improved and the Government has a strategy on gender equality, there is still work to do, with significant differences between various ethnic groups.” (Samphan DAFO)

“The situation has definitely improved, including for the Akha. However, the Akha and the Laolum should still be our priority.” (Mai DONRE)

“It's better than in the past, especially for communities that live along the road or speak the Lao language. The hardest is with the Yao communities.” (Ngot Ou DONRE)

The main challenges as identified by Government partners are for particular ethnic groups such as the Yao, Akha, Lao Su and Leu. When asked what the project could do to improve the situation, the actions suggested are:

- Awareness raising, targeting young women and men;
- Apply a 'model village' approach, to demonstrate to others and encourage peer-to-peer learning;
- Women-led and workload-reducing livelihoods (e.g. rattan production, livestock), with first understanding the farming division of labor before doing any intervention;
- Information, advice or training through women first, as men do not share information – but using local language;
- More collaboration between DAFO, DONRE and Lao Women Union, and;
- Gender integration into each activity.

Staff's understanding about gender issues in Phongsaly and causes of inequality (imbalanced decision-making, education, mobility, control over resources, bodily integrity etc.) is comprehensive. However, they still require a better understanding of how to practically address the main gender issues within this project meaning which specific actions to take on gender beyond only providing training or information or increasing women's participation in project activities.²³

²² Women/men staff division in the three districts is as follows: 9/24 (DAFO Mai, with vice-head being a woman); 6/5 (DONRE Mai); 11/21 (DAFO Samphan); 6/11 (DONRE Samphan); 7/26 (DAFO Ngot Ou); 3/11 (DONRE Ngot Ou).

²³ CARE has a wealth of resources that can help with this. In addition, in December 2015, the NU PCR Project Manager and Northern Program Coordinator were also introduced to the following practical guideline: *Making It Count: Integrating Gender into Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction*. CARE in Vietnam, GIZ and UN Women. 2015 (available online). The Phongsaly-based local gender advisor can use this resource to help the team identify practical actions to address priority gender issues the project wants to address.

The project can potentially achieve **transformational impact** through one or more of the following ways:

- Increased women's access to information (e.g. direct recipient of climate and weather information, farming advice and training), access to markets and control over productive assets, including finance (through voucher system and VSLA);
- Household decision-making on farming and income decisions – with improved financial literacy;
- Shared and reduced work load, and strengthened role of women in farming - with women (from all ethnic groups) not only being producers but also sellers, traders, processors, negotiators, trainers, extension workers and decision-makers along the entire value chain;
- Improved women's social capital, but also the necessary creation of 'safe spaces' – through VSLA and women-only farmer groups (rather than mixed groups);
- Women's participation and influence in community and Government decision-making;
- Confidence building;
- Increased mobility of women, beyond the village vicinity;

The project should again prioritize and aim to substantially achieve a few issues, while producing mere contributions to other. Since current levels of gender equality are different per village and district, customized interventions are needed on a case by case basis as well as engaging with men strategies.²⁴ The currently drafted NU PCR Gender Action Plan is a good start and should be adjusted, prioritized and agreed with partners based on the above suggestions.

²⁴ For more guidance, see: <http://www.care.org/sites/default/files/documents/2009-SII-Womens-Empowerment-and-Engaging-Men-Brief.pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendations

The NU PCR project is clearly an ambitious undertaking but very relevant given the resilience context in Phongsaly. It is in line with farmer as well as Government needs and priorities, and its emphasis on gender is commendable. Although implementation is accelerating, the project needs considerable prioritization to achieve lasting impact on the three main results; institutional capacity, community resilience and policy change. Information gathered through various analyses, including the baseline assessment, as well as the following set of guiding questions and recommendations can help in this process:

Questions to keep asking during the project implementation:

- *Resilience vs. rural development* - How are this project and its interventions different compared to or complementing a livelihood or food security project?
- *Impact at scale* –Where can the project achieve the highest and quickest impact within the resources available? What is meaningful beyond the project target location?
- *Lasting change* – What can we do already now to contribute to sustainability? How will each activity be done further without project input?

Recommendations:²⁵

Result 1:

1. **Revise CVCA** to better integrate gender, link it to community and Government adaptation planning and adapt it **into an annual update and feedback mechanism** facilitated by farmers and/or Government, focusing on reviewing and planning adaptation actions;
2. Continue improving capacity of Government partners on key priority 'topics of change' (in line with the outcome mapping) through a **more strategic institutional capacity building** plan, including **promoting inter-sectoral and inter-district collaboration**. For example, engage Lao Women Union to train other departments on gender;
3. Conduct a rapid screening of available policies and programs on gender. Facilitate the **development of a climate change strategy or action plan for Phongsaly province** or project districts – utilize this opportunity to integrate NU PCR learning and good practice;

Result 2:

4. **Re-prioritize livelihood support** to interventions which are potentially more impactful **for long term and community resilience** (compared to small-scale household based in-kind livelihood support or one-off trainings), for example on agro-climate information services; farmers' livelihood decision-making and planning process; agroforestry and large scale alternatives to upland rice, water management, or natural resources protection;
5. In the medium term, **convert small scale livelihood support** (animal raising, beekeeping) into more commercially viable opportunities with inter-cropping potential (mushroom, fruit trees);
6. **Increasingly put farmers 'in the driving seat'**, for example on: selecting livelihood options; analysis and dissemination of climate information; training other farmers or villages; peer-to-peer learning – ensuring women and men are equally involved and benefit;
7. **Be aware of community governance issues** and power imbalances, particularly when engaging the village leader or with all the project interventions related to farmer groups;
8. **Apply a communication-for-behavioral change approach** to awareness raising instead of only providing information. Ensure these efforts fully and ambitiously **value ethnic minorities** in terms of language, visuals,

²⁵ These should be read together with the NU PCR baseline assessment recommendations.

approach, community roles etc. building on existing good practice for example with Akha and Khmu local volunteers;

Result 3:

9. **Harmonize the project M&E** tools and plan, ensure a thorough and shared understanding among all the staff and speed up implementation. **Involve Government partners** in project M&E – with safeguards to ensure farmers distinguish Government and non-Government M&E;
10. **Agree on two** (or maximum three) **advocacy topics**, one local and one national (for example the climate change and DRR law currently being discussed), to inform the advocacy plan. **Link documentation purposefully to advocacy**, clarifying the what, why, for whom and how of each documentation piece, and mobilize additional support, for example from CARE Denmark, to develop these documents;
11. Towards the end of the project, **organize a lessons learned sharing opportunity** involving neighboring districts. Engage farmers for sharing good practice, and allow time for other districts to visit project experience;

Project management and partnerships:

12. CARE Lao PDR to **urgently recruit permanent climate change technical expertise**, additional field staff and more strategic support from the head office;
13. SAEDA to improve follow-up on training and other technical support provided to the project;
14. Further **explore** short or long term **collaboration with a research institute**;
15. Building on international and national good practice, **introduce a beneficiary accountability mechanism**;
16. CCL and CARE to **facilitate more and more longer term staff exchange** between the three districts, between national and local levels and among the three NGO partners to encourage a partnership way of working.

Annexes

1. Terms of Reference for baseline assessment and formative midterm review;
2. Baseline assessment plan, including assessment framework, methodology, survey team and schedule;
3. Key Informant Interviews – guiding questions for Government and NGO partners;
4. Power point presentation '*Reflecting on change: preliminary findings*'.

Literature reviewed

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- Potential of community-based NTFP managements as coping mechanisms in response to climate hazards. Preliminary study from Phongsaly province. CARE Lao PDR, CCL, LIWG, GCA, SAEDA. 2015.
- Women, Food and Land. Understanding the impact of gender on nutrition, food security and community resilience in Lao PDR. Risk and Vulnerability Survey 2012/13. Qualitative Analysis. CARE, FAO, 2013.
- Women Organized for Rural Development: baseline report Phongsaly. CARE Lao PDR, L. Malam, 2015.
- Other NU PCR project documentation and reports from other CCL and CARE projects: design, work plans, M&E reports, progress markers, field mission reports, CVCA reports, village profiles etc.