



Technologically Enhanced Agricultural Livelihoods (TEAL) - Mid-Term Review Executive Summary

December 2019

CARE International in Vietnam



It starts with equal

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Acknowledgements

The author thanks CARE International in Vietnam management and staff for their time, patience, and honesty in sharing their opinions, challenges, and successes with the Technologically Enhanced Agricultural Livelihoods project. Special thanks to Le Xuan Hieu, Vu Minh Hai, Le Thi Linh Chi, Ha Thi Quynh Nga, Le Thi Hong Giang, Ngo Thi Thanh Huong, Nguyen Thi Thanh Nhan, and Vu Lan Huong. In addition, the author would like to express gratitude to coffee experts, Tran Dinh Trong (Director of Eatu Fair Trade Cooperative), and An Thanh (Lecturer of BARISTA School in Saigon) who provided valuable technical inputs.

The views in this paper are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of CARE or its programs, or the Australian Government or any other partners.

Image: Bun (left) and Mon (right) are members of a coffee processing group in Son La province which is supported by TEAL. Credit: CARE/Nguyen Ngoc Son



Executive Summary

Launched on 1 July 2017, the *Technologically Enhanced Agricultural Livelihoods* project (TEAL) in Vietnam is a four-year project funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Australian NGO Cooperation (ANCP) initiative. The project has been implemented in four communes, two in Dien Bien province and two in Son La province.

TEAL is focused on supporting ethnic minority women coffee farmers to improve coffee production, processing, and market linkages to increase their income, and to shift gender norms that are preventing women from having a visible, respective and productive role in the coffee market system and broader society.

TEAL is in Year 3 of a proposed four-year design. CARE International in Vietnam (CVN) decided to conduct an internal midterm review aimed at assessing progress to date and provide formative recommendations for the final 1.5 years of the project. It is expected these recommendations will assist TEAL in achieving its objective and end-of-project outcomes. The review considered relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of the project's activities. There was also a particular emphasis on assessing the extent to which the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system was 'fit for purpose,' and reviewing progress of gender equality and disability inclusion efforts.

The mid-term review (MTR) was an evaluative exercise and also a learning and documentation exercise involving the consolidation of information from secondary sources, and exploring key questions with CVN staff and independent coffee experts in an MTR workshop. There was limited primary data collected for the MTR, the reasons for which are explained in the report.

Overall, the MTR found that progress towards end-of-project outcomes has been mixed. There have been some achievements but there are also a number of challenges. The questionable reliability of project data, lack of outcome level data, and lack of ad hoc monitoring are serious concerns which need to be urgently addressed.

Key Findings

End-of-Project Outcome 1: Ethnic minority women farmers are recognised as valuable actors in the Arabica coffee value chain

Achievements

- **Focusing efforts on coffee processing groups has helped targeted groups produce higher quality coffee which will likely lead to improved income** in the upcoming harvesting season and improved position in the value chain. Focusing efforts will also likely accelerate efforts to support formalisation of groups as foreseen in the project design.
- **Exposing women to other coffee farmers has** helped them take a leading role in improving coffee production and processing in their households, at least in Son La. It has also **helped increase their aspirations** of what is possible.
- The **Gender Transformation and Disability Inclusion Action Plan is a good practice** and this deliberate investment has laid a strong foundation for the implementation of project activities.

Challenges

- While targeting investment in coffee processing groups can be seen an achievement, it is also a challenge. **Significant staff time and project resources are being invested in three processing groups comprising 18 households as of the MTR, which poses value for money questions.** Targeted investment is important from a market systems development (MSD) perspective, and the project efforts may be catalytic in terms of achieving systems change but this was yet to be seen at the MTR. The project is supporting improved production quality, linkages between the private sector and farmers, piloting new coffee processing models, improving branding, and establishing coffee cooperatives, all of which have the potential to impact systems level change. Furthermore, TEAL's ambition is the coffee cooperatives will be able to buy coffee from poor farmers at a higher price. However, it is important the project continue to consider value for money for the remainder of the project and that this targeted investment actually results in broader systems level impact.
- The **ability to scale the gender dialogues while maintaining quality and sustainability is a question** which the team needs to consider further. The gender dialogues are very resource-intensive (money and time) and often only reach a small number of people. Furthermore, the community facilitators will work when they are receiving an incentive but whether they continue this after the project is unknown.
- TEAL has predominately focused on activities that target women with little attention given to engaging men and boys. Overall, the MTR found **engaging men and boys is a major gap which is potentially having unintended negative consequences**, or the very least not supporting the achievement of project outcomes.
- **Women-led mixed-sex producer groups have not been implemented** as designed with the focus shifting to the three processing groups. Some cross-visits have been supported but this has been limited. Overall, there has been **less investment of project resources in women's leadership and networking** than anticipated. Opportunities need to be identified to ensure activities can support women to have a visible, respected and productive role in the coffee market system in line with the project's objective.
- **Women's self-efficacy was identified as an area which needs to be explored further.** It was the second largest contributor to women's disempowerment in research conducted under the GTAR project¹ with a small sample of TEAL participants. Self-efficacy includes women's confidence in their skills, and their abilities to achieve goals and overcome obstacles. This finding could not be verified in the MTR so needs to be explored further in project implementation.

End-of-Project Outcome 2: Ethnic minority women benefit from increased income from the Arabica coffee value chains

Achievements

- TEAL has **helped create space for negotiation and dialogue among coffee processing groups and market actors.** TEAL has also worked with Minh Tien, Phuc Sinh, and coffee

¹ Analysing Gender Transformative Approaches to Agricultural Development with Ethnic Minority Communities in Vietnam project implemented in partnership with Murdoch University and funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)

experts to provide training on coffee production and processing, including 4C and UTZ certification to help farmers increase income.

- **TEAL co-invested in processing equipment for the three processing groups which is allowing them to value add and will likely help them increase their income**, although this could not be verified during the MTR.

Challenges

- **CARE and implementing partners lacked coffee expertise** when designing the project so staff have largely been learning about the coffee market system in implementation. This has been supported by engaging coffee experts and identifying coffee companies to provide technical inputs. However, there is still a lack of understanding about all of the different actors, who does and who pays for what, and CARE's value add (i.e. not a traditional NGO or market actor, but a facilitator and broker of relationships). There is also a lack of understanding about how the project can support systemic change and how the project's activities will be sustained after the project ends. Overall, there is a need to apply a stronger MSD approach.
- **Income is not being monitored so it is difficult to assess progress towards the end-of-project outcome.** While production and processing activities are fairly nascent under TEAL, the project still needs to ensure there is monitoring in place to track this across all project participants, not just the three processing groups.
- **TEAL is yet to systematically monitor and capture the extent to which farmers are changing their behaviours and practices to increase their income** and benefits from the coffee value chain. Up until the MTR, no systematic follow-up or ad hoc monitoring had been conducted to understand the effectiveness of coffee production trainings.
- **Contracts are not being honoured by farmers or companies so TEAL needs to review and clarify its value add** in addressing this issue, if any.
- **Women's access to and decision on control over use of income was identified as an area which needs to be explored further.** It was the top contributor to women's disempowerment in research conducted under the GTAR project with a small sample of TEAL participants. This includes women's control over use of income, ownership of land and other assets, and input in productive decisions. This finding could not be verified in the MTR so needs to be explored further in project implementation.
- **By not addressing time poverty, TEAL may actually be unintentionally negatively impacting women's agency.** As TEAL is a gender transformative project, the project needs to carefully understand and respond to women and men's lived experience to ensure the activities are relevant and effective.
- **The identification and introduction of technologies has been problematic.** A harvesting machine made for flat land destroyed coffee bushes in hilly locations. The processing machines help farmers to value add and process more volume but 'natural' coffee actually achieves a higher price in the market. The machines also need ongoing maintenance, and access to electricity and water. Furthermore, **environmental impacts of the processing equipment was not adequately considered before it was installed which needs urgent attention.**
- **Resilience to disaster risk and climate change has not been sufficiently considered and integrated into the project.** Arabica coffee is notoriously vulnerable to climate events in

particular, frost and cold spells, and pests. Development gains could quickly be lost if disaster risks are not mitigated and there are no activities to promote resilience to climate change. This needs further attention.

- Given the focus on establishing village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) and coffee processing groups, and implementing coffee production training, there has been **limited focus to date on marketing and generating consumer demand for Arabica coffee** as per Intermediate Outcome 2.3.

End-of-Project Outcome 3: Ethnic minority women in the Arabica coffee value chain are financially included and supported by implementation of policy

Achievements

- Overall, **VSLAs have been one of the main successes of TEAL with the project exceeding the design target** (design target: 60; actual achievement 65 VSLAs). There is continued strong demand for VSLAs which is evidence of their relevance. Even through the monetary value of loans from VSLAs is small, members appreciate the easy access to finance without the need for collateral and paperwork.

Challenges

- As of the MTR, there had been **no progress on advocating to the government**. In response to preliminary MTR findings, CVN facilitated an internal advocacy workshop to ensure there is a clear plan with roles and responsibilities going forward.
- The **Dien Bien Government is not investing in the expansion of coffee gardens**. This raises serious questions as to whether the end-of-project outcome can be achieved, and whether the project should continue to invest in Dien Bien if the Government is not committed to coffee. It also raises value for money and sustainability concerns.
- Financial literacy training has been rolled out across Dien Bien and Son La provinces, however there are **data reliability issues, lack of monitoring of outcomes of financial literacy training, and concerns raised about the effectiveness of the trainings**.
- **While issuing bank loans to the target groups was not possible as expected, other collaboration opportunities or alternatives were not followed up** either with LienVietPostBank or microfinance institutions. This needs to be actioned to ensure the achievement of Intermediate Outcome 3.1: increased financial inclusion for women-led producer groups.

Overall, the project remains **relevant** to farmers, the government and private sector in Son La. The Dien Bien Government is not investing in the expansion of coffee gardens like Son La, but is supporting improved coffee quality. There is evidence that people still want to cut down their coffee gardens due to the low price which suggests that TEAL may not be meeting some farmers' needs. TEAL is strongly aligned with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Aid Investment Plan, particularly the Gender-Responsive and Equitable Agriculture and Tourism (GREAT) program which is working in Son La and Lao Cai provinces.

In terms of **gender**, most efforts to date have focused on women's **agency** in the formal sphere, in particular through skills training and sharing knowledge on coffee production and processing. Under the **relations** domain, TEAL has mostly focused on the formal sphere though creating VSLAs. In terms of the

non-formal sphere, the gender dialogues are designed to bring women and men together to unpack different gender issues including social norms, gendered division of labour, and decision making with gender-based violence (GBV) integrated throughout. From the discussion, women and men develop household gender transformation plans. However due to monitoring challenges, it is unknown whether these action plans have actually been implemented and whether the gender dialogue activities have had the desired effect. In relation to the **structures** domain, there has been no progress on the formal sphere and limited progress in the informal sphere. There had been no community-level events to engage community members in addressing gendered social norms. There had also be no progress on implementing **gender-based violence** activities. However, just prior to the MTR, CVN staff decided to take a social norms approach to the gender dialogues and had recruited four community facilitators to support with intensive implementation in the following months.

In relation to **disability inclusion**, significant efforts have been made to make TEAL and CVN's work more disability inclusive which is commendable. The Gender Transformation and Disability Inclusion Action Plan created at the start of the project, and the collaboration with the Center for Research and Inclusive Development Action (IDEA), a Disabled People's Organisation, are particular highlights. While the reported participation of people with disabilities is still low with no people with disabilities involved in coffee production, the project team is making positive progress to improve community understanding and practice and identifying opportunities to increase the participation of people with disabilities.

In relation to **ethnic minorities**, TEAL intended to work with Thai and H'Mong. In implementation the project is predominately working with Thai (74%). This is followed by Tay (13%), Kinh (5%), H'Mong (4%), Dao (2%), and Khac (2%). The reason the project did not work with H'Mong to the extent designed is H'Mong often live far apart in difficult to reach locations and it is challenging for them to have regular VSLA meetings. CVN's experience is that they often joint later in projects as well once the project's benefits are clear. It appears the design did not adequately adjust activities based on this experience. The project design also did not differentiate between Black Thai and White Thai who, it was discovered through the MTR, have different languages and customs. TEAL is incidentally working with Black Thai. In taking a rights-based and inclusive approach and a commitment to gender equality and diversity, CVN needs to proactively seek ways to ensure project activities are fully accessible to diverse ethnic minority people and that CVN is not unintentionally reinforcing the dominant narrative that all ethnic minorities need to assimilate, including through the use of the Vietnamese language.

In terms of **risk management, child protection, and protection from sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse (PSHEA)**, there is a project risk matrix and PSHEA and child protection (CP) risk matrix but they have not been used as project management tools. There is a need to review both matrices, clarify roles and responsibilities for monitoring risks and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies, and updating of the matrix. While there is a PSHEA and CP focal point in the CVN program team, roles and responsibilities for implementation and monitoring at the TEAL *project* level are unclear. This needs to be clarified and actioned. Further project-level PSHEA and CP training may also be warranted to ensure staff and implementing partners are able to fulfil their responsibilities. A formal feedback mechanism was not in place at the MTR but a CVN Feedback Mechanism was being finalised for implementation in the following months.

In relation to **sustainability**, according to the TEAL design, it was envisaged that the project would take a phased approach to support sustainability with project 'dose' decreasing over time. However, some activities are still quite nascent and only just starting to gain momentum. During the MTR, it also became clear that there has been limited consideration of sustainability so far in the project, and there is a need

for a clearer articulation of how project activities will be sustained, including who will be doing and paying for activities after the project ends. Particular concerns include: the increasing intensity of activities and volume of activities with only about 15 months left of implementation; subsidisation of equipment purchases and lack of formal financial linkages; lack of consideration of reducing disaster risk and increasing resilience to a changing climate; and the payment of community facilitators who are implementing gender dialogues. There are some enablers such as VSLAs, the private sector, the Son La Government, and leveraging other financial and non-financial resources, but overall, there is a need for a sustainability strategy.

Recommendations

These recommendations are intended to contribute to improved project planning and implementation for the TEAL project, with the hope that others may find useful lessons as well. The recommendations have been separated for the TEAL project and other projects. Further details about each recommendation can be found in Section 5 of the full report.

For TEAL

1. Overall, review scope of planned activities in the context of the MTR findings and prioritise activities to ensure project effectiveness and resources are not spread too thin.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

2. Revise the MEL system to ensure it is clearly understood, and there is timely and reliable data, monitoring of outcomes, and ad monitoring to ensure project effectiveness.
 - a. Revise the MEL Framework to:
 - i. Consolidate the number of data points required and focus on monitoring outcomes, intended and unintended.
 - ii. Refine implementation of Outcome Mapping or find another tool to help monitor outcomes.
 - iii. Ensure unintended consequences can be monitored, captured, and addressed as required.
 - iv. Ensure alignment between what data DFAT requires as the donor and what data is being captured in the MEL Framework.
 - v. Provide clear indicator definitions to ensure only valid data that meets the threshold is inputted to the database.
 - vi. Articulate tools for data collection, means of verification, frequency, and responsibilities.
 - vii. Clarify and reiterate roles and responsibilities relating to MEL among CVN staff and implementing partners and resolve any roadblocks.
 - b. Ensure the MEL system is used as the basis for donor reporting to avoid conflicting data.
 - c. Consult CVN staff and implementing partner staff (as users of the TEAL MEL system) to understand what is working and how to resolve roadblocks to improve MEL performance.

- d. Implement a system of ad hoc monitoring of projects to understand outcomes and project effectiveness.
- e. Improve project documentation and knowledge management to support evaluation and assessment of project performance.

Project Strategies

Environment and Resilience to a Changing Climate

3. Expedite efforts to treat wastewater and mitigate negative environmental impacts of coffee production and processing.
4. Define clear actions to reduce disaster risk and increase the resilience of crops to the changing climate.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

5. Prioritise the planned gender dialogues and social norms activities to ensure TEAL engages men and boys, does no harm, and contributes to preventing and addressing intimate partner violence.
6. Investigate the following issues further. The MTR indicated they may be issues but further investigation is needed to understand the extent and what actions TEAL needs to take, if any.
 - a. Identify opportunities to strengthen women's leadership, networking and market linkages with male market actors to ensure they can have a higher role in the value chain and gain more benefit.
 - b. Investigate the extent of women's disempowerment in relation to control over use of income, ownership of land and other assets, and input in productive decisions and take actions accordingly.
 - c. Ensure planning and implementation of project activities considers and addresses women's time poverty.
 - d. Investigate progress on women's self-efficacy include confidence in skills, her ability to achieve goals, and to overcome obstacles.
7. Review all project activities and proactively identify ways to ensure the project is fully accessible to ethnic minorities.

Market Systems Development

8. Prioritise opportunities to effect systems level change in the coffee market system ensuring broader impact.

Advocacy to Government

9. Consider focusing limited advocacy resources on Son La given the more favourable provincial government position on coffee and ability to leverage GREAT program

Value for Money

10. Apply a value for money approach to ensure limited resources are used to best effect.

Sustainability

11. Develop a sustainability strategy.

Private Sector Engagement

12. Diversify private sector partners to ensure TEAL is not overly reliant on one or two actors.
13. Re-consider TEAL's role in supporting contracts between farmers and market actors.
14. Review TEAL's role in improving access to formal financial services for project participants.

Managing and Reviewing Partnerships

15. Ensure implementing partners are held accountable for under-performance and this is managed promptly to maximise project effectiveness.

Risk Management, PSHEA and CP

16. Review the risk management matrix and ensure it is regularly updated, there are clear mitigation strategies as well as roles and responsibilities for follow-up.
17. Review the PSHEA and CP Risk Matrix, update the matrix as required, and clarify roles and responsibilities for monitoring and follow-up.

Project Management

18. Update the design document to reflect the changes in context and project strategies.
19. Ensure clear communication of project activities and participant selection to avoid confusion and jealousy.

For Other Projects

1. In any MSD or value chain projects, consult experts *in the particular commodity* during the project design.
2. Ensure significant shifts in project strategy are evidence-based and documented to support accountability and learning.
3. Consider environmental risks and conduct an environment impact assessment *prior* to investing in project activities that potentially have a negative impact on the environment.
4. Develop a Gender Transformation and Disability Inclusion Action Plan which provides a good foundation for integration of gender and social inclusion consideration.
5. Ensure assumptions in designs are evidence-based and gaps in evidence base are identified for follow-up.
6. Ensure CARE's Gender, Inclusive Governance and Resilience Markers are applied with rigour to inform project implementation.

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