

# **Final Report**

## **Systems-Level Impact Evaluation of “Women Empowerment for Climate Resistance” (WERC) Project at Midterm**

**CARE International Laos – June 2024**

## List of Acronyms

ACIS2	Applied Climate Information System 2
CAAP	Community Adaptation Action Plan
CDEA	Community Development & Environment Association
CDT	Community Dialogue Tool
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forest Office
DLWU	District Lao Women's Union
DONRE	District Office of Natural Resource and Environment
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLN	Farmer's Learning Network
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GCVCA	Gender-sensitive Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis
GDA	Gender Development Association
KII	Key Informant Interview
LFN	Lao Farmer's Learning Network
LWU	Lao Women's Union
NCSA	National Capacity Self-Assessment
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products
NU-PCR	Northern Uplands – Promoting Climate Resilience
POFA	Provincial Office of Foreign Affairs
SCALING	Sustainable Change Achieved through Linking Improved Nutrition and Governance
SUPA	Scaling Up Participatory Approaches
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association
WERC	Women Empowerment for Climate Resilience

## **INTRODUCTION**

The CARE International in Laos' project entitled: "Women Empowerment for Climate Resilience" (WECR) aims to enhance the capacity of women, particularly in ethnic minorities, to become more resilient to climate change. The project plan defines three pathways to empowerment; increased locally-led adaption, increased food and nutrition security, and defining a village-level action plan to increase women's participation in improving climate resiliency at the local level.

### **Project Background:**

The project takes place in 20 ethnic minority, rural agricultural communities of Khoua, Samphan and Mia Districts in the province of Phongsaly and involved 1,800 ethnic minority women, 1,400 children and their families. Most of the target populations' livelihoods primarily depend on upland agriculture of cash crops, livestock, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for export. Many villages have limited or no access to basic services such as electricity, running water, phone service, healthcare, and education.

## **EVALUATION PURPOSE and OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of the evaluation is to determine the system changes achieved by WERC. The evaluation aims to assess the project's effect and potential effect on the lives of the target population.

Evaluation questions:

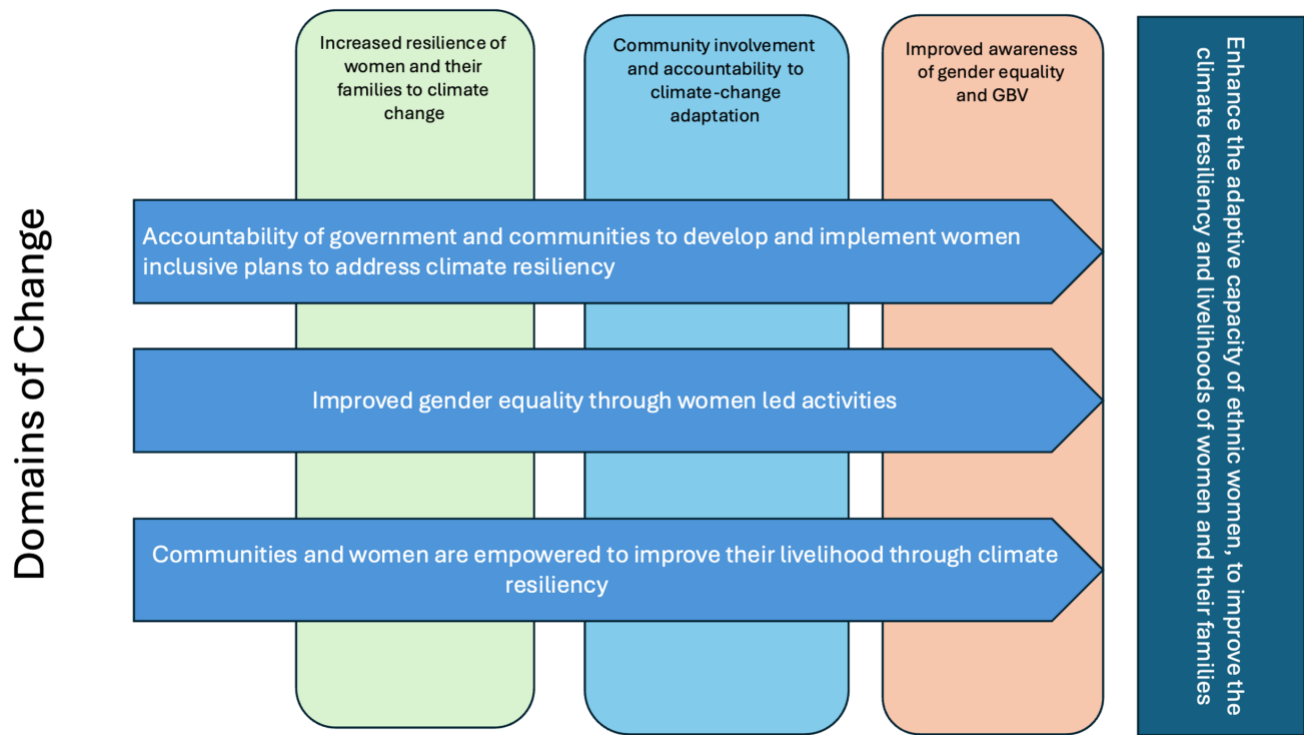
- What impact did the WERC activities have on system level pathways to improve livelihoods?

Systems and structural effects

- What system changes in social norms pathways were successful in improving livelihood?
- What system changes through social accountability pathways were successful?

Impact:

- What level of impact has been achieved in the empowerment of women in decision-making of improving their livelihoods through climate resilience?



## Methodology and Evaluation Design

The evaluation utilized the Outcome Harvester methodology along with desk review and follow-up interviews to answer questions about project outcomes, impact of interventions on livelihoods and sustainability. Outcomes of the evaluation consist of a) changes in behavior, b) gender attitudes, practice of knowledge learned, and c) changes in community-level participation.

The three relevant systems-level impact pathways assessed:

- Supporting and advancing changes in social norms
- System strengthening through accountability
- Supporting policy change to empower women in livelihood community decision-making

Questions	Pathways	Observation Harvest actors
How have the community level activities changed the participation of women in addressing climate change?	Supporting and advancing changes to social norms	CARE staff, technical staff, and other local partners in increasing awareness of climate change resistance, GDA, LWU
How have the community level activities addressed resistance to climate change and implementation?	Social systems and accountability pathways	Individual participation in CAAP, GCVCA and participation from CSO, DLWU, LWU

## Outcome Harvesting Documentation

The outcomes data collected and reviewed included:

- WERC Midterm Review
- Annex 2: Data Collection Tool
- KII – Project Stakeholder questionnaire and answers
- FGD – Village Authorities, Participant questionnaire and answers

Relevant actors: Community Development and Environment Association, Civil Society Organizations, District Agriculture and Forest Office, Gender Development Association, Lao Women’s Union, Provincial Agriculture and Forest Office, Village Savings and Loans Association

## Findings in Supporting Changes in Social Norms

*What system changes in the social norms pathway were successful?*

Evaluation of the project’s impact on the social norms pathway saw early indications of success in the target population of 900 women in 3 districts from the Phongsaly Province. The project’s support for women led activities in food security, women’s leadership and climate change adaption activities implemented by CARE Laos and other CSO actors has seen success by an increase of women’s participation in family planning, increased participation in community planning and an increase in gender-equitable norms at the village level.

**Outcome: An increase of women participating in leadership roles and in locally-led adaptation of community activities has led to a moderate change in the gender norms of women’s livelihood at the local level.**

Activities implemented by CARE Laos, government agencies and local CSO partners have been supported by the local government in addressing gender-norm issues. Activities such as the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA), along with the Gender Development Association (GDA) have

been supported by the local Lao Women's Union (LWU) as well as at the district level DAFO in improving women's capacity to in planning and income generation.

### **Contributions:**

A contribution from CARE Laos and the local Village Savings and Loans Association support group was through VSLA activities. They provided women with a platform for learning, exchange of ideas and income generation specifically to women. VSLA activities supported the empowerment of women through community support, emotionally, financially and in improving leadership skills. Through the support of the VSLA, women increased their participation in economic activities, increased their leadership and decision-making skills within their community in implementing efficient and climate resilient farming practices and thus their income generating capacity. Successful implementation was due to the diverse livelihood activities and information awareness of climate resistant practices distributed by CARE International Laos.

### **Significance:**

The increase of women's participation at the village level shows a strengthening of women's capacity, increased participation in leadership roles in community-based planning and a larger presence with local institutions to advocate for gender-inclusive movements. Local actors such as CSO's and the Lao Women's Union have been advocates for more gender-inclusive activities in areas where education and financial support have been lacking for many years. As part of this initiative, the Lao government along with support from CARE Laos and other CSO partners, have supported the utilization of the VSLA model to provide financial and decision-making access to marginalized women in rural areas where traditional gender-roles combined with low access to education and physical barriers have limited their participation. This participation has led to more women feeling empowered to lead in the decision-making of their communities by shifting gender norms in livelihood decisions. This model has been successfully implemented in other small, poor villages throughout Laos and other countries because it remains local, self-managed, and sustainable.

## **Findings in Strengthening Services and Accountability**

*What activities in social accountability pathway were successful?*

*How have system changes influenced government policy?*

How have the project's contributions lead to social accountability? Are the project's activities increasing community-based participation resulting in a pathway to improved livelihood?

**Outcome 1:** The ability of women to participate and lead in the decision-making process of adapting to climate change shocks was addressed through the implementation of the Gender-sensitive Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis tool (GCVCA) and Community Adaptation Action Plans (CAAP). The implementation of the tools resulted in an increased participation of women in community led processes to address food security issues of their families and community. These goals are in accordance

with the Lao National Socio-Economic Plan 2021-2025 with an aim of enhanced well-being of the people; most notably to alleviate poverty in rural and remote areas.

**Contributions:** Government partners, CSOs and CARE Laos contributed to the design and implementation of the GCVCA and CAAP process to include women and their communities to not only assess their vulnerabilities related to climate-related shocks but also how to address and overcome these vulnerabilities as a community.

WERC contributions coordinated and implemented by CARE Laos utilizing other successful projects included climate-smart agriculture (ACIS 2, SUPA, NU-PCR), dissemination of climate change information (ACIS 2), the use of VSLA and Community Dialogue Tools for gender inclusive planning, and water systems mechanism (SCALING).

CARE Laos coordinated and facilitated the contributions from the government and local CSOs included: District Agriculture and Forest Office (DAFO) provided technical experts on agriculture, District Office of Natural Resource and Environment (DONRE) technical experts on weather forecasts and dissemination of climate information, Lao Women's Union in assisting with implementation of projects and sharing of knowledge and successes with communities and the Gender Development Association in implementation and participation of GBV-nexus research project.

An aim of the GCVCA and CAAP process was the strengthening of community preparedness for climate related shocks such as floods or droughts, which are common in Laos. Coordination from all partners involved contributed to the development of early warning systems and community-based disaster risk management plans to minimize risks and mitigate losses in planting and agriculture along with dissemination of weather information from a forecasting system.

### **Significance:**

Adaptation of the GCVCA and CAAP tools provided guidance and structure for accountability. In cooperation with the Lao government the tools have been successful improving the nutritional status of marginalized women and children under 5 years of age in the rural communities of Houaphanh, Luang Namtha, Luang Prabang and Phongsaly provinces. The GCVCA and CAAP tools have been supported by the LWU at the village level in increasing the participation of women in leadership roles and assessing of the needs of climate resistant agriculture. This is in line with the Lao government declaration of *National Capacity Self-Assessment (NCSA)* to identify the needs and assesses the capacity of the country. This is also in line with the current Lao National Agriculture Development Strategy Vision 2025-2030 which aims to develop the capacity of female farmers and poor families of ethnic groups in remote areas with the introduction of new production techniques and access to information.

### **Outcome 2:**

Civil society partners from the Community Development and Environment Association (CDEA) provided guidelines and support for the development of the Gender Sensitive Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis (GCVCA) and Community Accountability Mechanism (CAM) to improve accountability and GBV awareness.

**Contributions:**

The contributions from CARE Laos were the implementation of the GCVCA for communities' self-assessment of their livelihood needs towards locally led adaptation to climate change and the CAAP for Climate Change Adaption. The CCAP Also a big contributor was the local VSLA which contributed funds and learning activities to support women's leadership and capacity building initiatives.

In addition, CARE Laos has been instrumental in the integration of gender considerations into climate policies. By empowering women and ensuring their participation in climate action, CARE has been influential in shaping policies that are more inclusive and effective.

**Significance:**

Coordination with the Gender Development Association (GDA) to support the development and implementation of the Community Dialogue Tool (CDT) resulted in better understanding on gender equality and workload equality in the community. Support was also provided by the Village Savings and Loans Association model in shifting gender norms from the male sole income source to women having more confidence in participating in income generating decisions to sustain their family and women's capacity to participate in leading roles generally considered solely for men. These tools have been highly praised by village community leaders as well as local CSOs for increasing awareness of GBV issues through discussions, curriculum and developing action plans at the village level. The CAM process has been rolled out in all the target villages in cooperation with local government agencies. This is in line with the Law of Disaster Management which promotes women's empowerment and participation in disaster management at the village level and is included in the Lao Women's Union Village Disaster Management Committee.

**Significance: Impact on Individuals**

Although the magnitude of a system wide impact could not be determined at the time of the midline assessment, positive indications in the community can be seen through the increased participation of women in decision-making, income generating capacity and leadership roles in the community. This shows a direct impact on the social norms in the male dominated role of income decision maker. Women feel more empowered to participate and lead in community planning activities to better address the issues in climate change and their livelihoods. VSLA's have produced a significant impact on women's lives through empowerment by supporting women's income generating potential in providing income, training in managing money and confidence in accessing leadership roles.

**Outcome 3:**

An increase in climate change knowledge and application of climate resiliency techniques has led to improved sustainable agricultural practices to help communities address changes in climate conditions.



**Contributions:**

CARE Laos has contributed to the development and implementation of community-based disaster risk management plans. These plans aim to enhance the preparedness and resilience of communities to climate-related disasters such as floods and droughts. Along with government partners, contributions included the climate change-GBV nexus research plan, and training on climate resilient agricultural techniques through an adaptation of the GCVCA tool. Part of the training program included efficient farming methods and the construction of irrigation systems. This resulted in sustainable agricultural practices such as sustainable water sources and improved quality of land, terraced paddy fields and intercropping with drought-resistant cash crops and crop diversity utilizing climate smart agriculture and weather information. The implementation of the tools was based on the success of other contributions from CARE Laos and other partners such as the climate-smart agriculture project (ACIS 2, SUPA, NU-PCR), climate information and dissemination (ACIS 2) and SCALING.

**Significance:**

As communities and partners implemented GDA led activities and developed plans to reduce GBV, women have become more confident and the village and district authorities have noticed. Agencies including DAFO, PAFO, DONRE and also the Lao Farmer's Learning Network (FLN) have embraced the activities and achievements of the project which are in line with the agricultural and gender goals of the local partners. These activities are also in line with the national objectives; 9<sup>th</sup> National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2021-2026 which includes the aim of alleviating poverty in rural and remote areas and the equal access to socio-economic development opportunities and the rights of women and children. More women participating in addressing their family needs through climate resilient agriculture is in line with the Laos Nation Agriculture Development Strategy 2025 which aims to develop and strengthen the capacity of female farmers of ethnic groups and rural areas through increased knowledge and application of climate resilient techniques. Another Lao national decree was the National Strategy on Climate Change of Laos PDR (2021) which focuses on the impact, adaptation and resilience to climate change impacts. CARE Laos has advocated for policies that support sustainable agricultural practices contributing to the development of national climate strategies and action plans that align with international frameworks such as the Paris Agreement. This includes advocating for the adoption of climate-resilient crops and efficient farming techniques to help farmers adapt to changing climate conditions. In addition, CARE has contributed to policies that improve the resilience of health systems to climate impacts. This includes ensuring access to clean water and sanitation, which are critical during extreme weather events.

**Scalability:**

The success of the adaptability of the tools at the local level shows scalability beyond the local level.

The changes and implementation of the GCVCA and CAAP tools for assessment and accountability contributed to the impact at the community level. This is similar to the success of the SCALING project which has been successfully implemented in 4 provinces in Laos. Further success in WERC shows the potential for system level changes with long-term implementation.

## **Lessons Learned**

Of the 3 main activities 1) locally led adaptation to climate change, 2) food security and 3) GBV; the locally-led adaptation to climate change by women was successful due to the coordination between CARE Laos, local CSO's and government partners in implementing the assessment and accountability tools. The success of implementing the GCVCA, CAAP and CAM tools highlighted collective contributions of the communities and accountability between the participants and government partners. This also shows the flexibility of the WERC project and ability to adapt previously successful tools to the local context.

Existing relationships have been strengthened and showcased by the WERC project. Cooperation from government partners at PAFO, DAFO, along with community-based organizations such as LWU and VSLAs has been paramount to the successful implementation of the project's activities. Women and their communities feel empowered by participating in the activities with the support of their local authorities and contributions from CARE Laos and other CSO's in capacity building workshops and financial support of these projects that are in line with the Lao government's National Nutrition Plan and the National Plan of Action on Gender Equality (2021-2025).

## **Limitations and Challenges Overall:**

The WERC project was set to begin in August 2021 but due to various factors, baseline data was not collected until just before mid-term of the project so midterm review data was limited in scope and participation. Some limitations around this evaluation include project design and evaluation timeframe. The timeframe provided for the evaluation and outcome harvesting was 30 days. Also limited access to outcome actors for follow-up outcome harvesting.

Challenges still exist in reaching these rural communities both physically and in communication. Due to the rural and mountainous nature of the area, most of the target population was difficult to access as infrastructure such as roads, electricity or running water or phone service was minimal to non-existent. Additionally, because these are ethnic communities, some women may not have the education necessary for reading, writing and language comprehension. Also, community outreach and support from government agencies as well as civil society have been intermittent.

System level impact may be limited due to low education and literacy rates in the remote, rural communities in Laos. Although the Lao government has nationwide decrees to improve access to climate resistant agriculture, GBV initiatives and gender equality; funding and technical expertise continues to be a long-term goal for sustaining nationwide initiatives.

## **Recommendations and future directions**

At the point of the Mid-Term review, CARE Laos has been able to successfully adapt the community level tools of GCVCA and CAAP to increase accountability, participation and the knowledge base of the target participants. Continued support for these projects could show more long-term system-level impact and coordination with district and provincial governments. Project goals and implementation strategies

should be in line with Lao national government goals and continued strengthening of relationships with other stakeholders such as CSOs and NGOs in the region.

**Provide platforms and networks to exchange information and lessons learnt to extend beyond the community level.**

The community-based activities have been very successful in increasing awareness of issues and participation of women in community activities. Existing relationships with government partners such as LWU and district level agencies can be utilized further in dissemination of information. Loudspeaker lessons, government approved posters and technical documents promoting best practices can increase participation and communication beyond the village level and promote achievements.

**Continued support and relationships with other CSOs and civil society.**

The success of the VSLA model is seen not only in women's empowerment but capacity building and financial support at the community level as well. Relationship with the LWU, district and provincial level government partners and alignment to relevant Lao national goals should continue to foster to enable better implementation of existing and future projects. With the continued success of these relationships, the project's activities could impact individuals and other partnerships at the community level if they were cascaded to the districts and provinces.

**Follow-up on system-level impact pathways and continued support of WERC.**

Though the mid-term evaluation showed some system level impact on social norms and women empowerment, long term system level changes show potential in other pathways such as nutritional food security and GBV issues. Relationships with the government partners at the district level should continue to support and show relevancy to national decrees in health and equality for all. Periodic review and assessment of project implementation and any impacts should be planned and recommended for all organisations and government partners involved.