

# Gender and Ethnic Dynamics of Household Decision Making in Hydropower-related Resettlement



HYDROPOWER RESETTLEMENT VILLAGE IN LAO PDR. SOURCE: NIREKA WEERATUNGE  
INSET: THEUN-HINBOUN DAM. SOURCE: OLIVIER JOFFRE/WORLDFISH

## MAIN MESSAGE

**When designing effective livelihood strategies for people in villages affected by hydropower development, it is vital to account for a multiplicity of factors that contribute to overall wellbeing of men and women, as well as of different ethnic groups.**

Rehabilitation or improvement of livelihoods comprises an important component of hydropower-related resettlement and relocation strategies in Lao PDR and other developing countries. Yet too often such strategies are designed without adequate consideration for the nuanced nature of ‘joint’ household decision-making. A recent study at an ethnic minority village in Bolikhamxay Province, Lao PDR, relocated as part of the Theun-Hinboun hydropower project, revealed some of the underlying gender values, norms and practices that influence the decision making patterns of community members. The insights may help to explain why, despite the implementation of a multi-faceted livelihood package based on consultations with affected villagers, adoption by households remains a challenge. The example highlights a number of lessons and considerations when planning and executing future livelihood strategies for dam-affected communities.

**Insight #1: It is important to assess the extent to which decisions relating to livelihoods are made jointly or are gendered.**

Different perceptions of decision-making between men and women add a layer of complexity to the design of resettlement, compensation and livelihood packages provided by hydropower companies, which tend to target a household as a unitary entity. Attention needs to be paid to decisions that are perceived differently by women and men, especially those that are thought to be made solely by husbands or wives, rather than jointly. In general, women tended to perceive more decisions as jointly made than men, who differentiated a larger proportion of decisions as made by wives or husbands.

Where decision-making is joint, or where women have an important part in decision-making, it is imperative to sustain gender equity in decisions relating to these livelihood activities or ensure gender equity in decisions relating to the replacement of these livelihood activities. Where males dominate decisions, livelihood interventions need to look at ways in which the decision-making opportunities for women can be enhanced.



RICE SHEAVES.  
SOURCE: NIREKA WEERATUNGE

Ethnicity also factors into household decision-making in general, and the extent of male and female influence in particular. Different ethnic groups may show a preference for different livelihood activities, and vary in the degree to which household decisions are made jointly.

**Insight #2: When designing livelihood packages, hydropower companies tend to focus on the material aspects of wellbeing. Thus, ensuring joint assets and equity in capabilities (education and health) can help to maintain, or enhance, joint decision-making. However, relational and subjective aspects of wellbeing often intertwine with material aspects.**

In the case of the study site in Lao PDR (see feature box), joint ownership of the house and land can be linked to joint decision-making. However, other factors that impact asset ownership and capabilities, including underlying gender values, norms and practices, should be given adequate consideration in assessment and planning.

The social and subjective significance placed by villagers on upland rice and food security also influences household decision-making. Thus, upland rice might not be considered merely a livelihood

**Understanding the subjective differences in attitudes, feelings and aspirations that impinge on decisions is very important. For example, attitudes of dependency on the company for rice can temporarily change gendered decision making in the household, restricting women to weaving and men to fishing, or both to fishing. Conversely, maintaining independence from the company by cultivating former upland rice plots and/or river gardens, retains joint decision making but increases the work burden of women, as they now have to travel further to their former plots or can change joint decision making as only men travel to, and work on, former plots.**

activity that can be replaced by another activity, but also as a tradition and identity. If weaving and fishing are supported while the space for upland rice, riverbank gardens, livestock and non-timber forest product collection is restricted, this changes previous household decision-making patterns, based on a larger portfolio of livelihood activities, with implications for gender relations and equity.



MAN WEIGHING FISH BEFORE LOADING FOR SALE.  
SOURCE: NIREKA WEERATUNGE



RIVER BANK GARDEN.  
SOURCE: OLIVIER JOFFRE/WORLDFISH



WOMAN WEAVING MATS.  
SOURCE: OLIVIER JOFFRE/WORLDFISH

**Insight #3: The differential influence of external actors (i.e. social networks) on the decisions of men and women must be factored into planning.**

Social networks constituted by peers and kin tend to influence men's livelihood decisions, whereas buyers of agricultural and craft products tend to influence women's decisions. Overall both women and men did not perceive a large role for hydropower companies or government agencies in their household decision-making processes, indicated by weak links between communities and these external actors, despite the latter's pivotal role in the resettlement process. This needs to be understood within the historical context of development in Lao PDR. It may reflect the specific nature of consultation and limited

**Women's control over decisions on riverbank gardening and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) has decreased due to newly enforced land use patterns, with resultant material costs for both women and men. The control of women over weaving has increased with material benefits for both women and men, and relational and subjective benefits for women.**

options provided by external actors for decision-making and/or the perceived irrelevance of options in negotiating livelihood packages with project-affected women and men. It might also be due to the general distrust of rural people in

interventions by external development actors. In addition, the changes that rural people are looking for might not always be congruent with those of the state or hydropower companies.

**Insight #4: When evaluating the impact of new, proposed livelihood schemes, it is necessary to disaggregate the costs and benefits to women and men, as well as ethnic groups, separately.**

These costs and benefits need to be assessed not only in material, but in relational and subjective terms as well. Such an analysis would provide a clearer understanding of why some household members accept and others reject livelihood options offered by hydropower development, and what changes need to be made.

## The Case of Kham<sup>1</sup> Village

Kham Village was established in mid-2011 to house 181 households resettled from four 'traditional' villages along the Nam Gnouang River. The village's main ethnic groups are the Tai Maen (55%) and Tai Yor (37%), with a small number of Tai Meuy and mixed ethnic households. Within the village, four 'divisions' representing the original villages are maintained, with their ethnic characteristics intact. Two divisions are predominantly inhabited by Tai Maen while the other two have a majority population of Tai Yor. Livelihoods in Kham are primarily based on subsistence agriculture, with some cash from upland rice and other crops, gardens, fishing, weaving and off-farm labor.

Focus group discussions and qualitative semi-structured interviews, based on a livelihood trajectory tool and social network mapping, were conducted in Kham Village in order to better understand the complexities of decision-making in resettled households. Both male and female respondents agreed on the joint nature of household decision-making for most livelihood activities. However, some discrepancies did exist; of a total of 55 livelihood-related decisions, women perceived 78% as being made jointly while men cited 58% as joint. Men considered decisions relating to the purchase of seed, feed and fertilizer, where and when to sell products, payment for services (electricity, water) and childcare



FISHING BOATS ON THE RESERVOIR. SOURCE: OLIVIER JOFFRE/WORLDFISH

as solely made by wives, while women considered these to be made jointly. Further analysis revealed that decisions relating to upland rice (including harvest rituals), fishing, cattle, hunting and education are more influenced or made by men. Decisions relating to riverbank gardens, vegetable gardens, NTFP collection, weaving, micro-enterprise, childcare and cooking were more influenced or made by women.

Many livelihood activities where decision-making was considered joint have been constrained by limited access to land under the new land use regime introduced by the government and the hydropower company. The biggest impacts appear to be the loss of upland rice, where men appeared to have more influence on decision making, and consequently benefits, and riverbank gardens, where women appeared to have more influence on decision making, as well

as benefits. The two livelihood activities that have become important since resettlement are weaving, in which decisions are mostly made by Tai Maen women, and reservoir fishing, in which decision making is dominated by men of both ethnic groups. Thus, an important part of household decision making currently is negotiating for time between these two livelihoods by wives and husbands.

Tai Yor villagers were more focused on fishing and/or upland rice, whereas the Tai Maen were oriented towards multiple livelihoods. Tai Maen household decision-making was relatively more 'joint', with both men and women contributing. In contrast, men appeared to have more influence in decision-making among the Tai Yor. Thus, underlying social norms and values related to ethnicity were also important factors in household decision-making.

<sup>1</sup> The name of the village has been changed to maintain privacy and confidentiality of the respondents.

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