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Paving the Road to Better Income Options: Case Study on Promoting Women's Livelihood and Employment Opportunities in Viet Nam

Abstract

[Excerpt] Infrastructure projects and road networks have the potential to catalyze socioeconomic change. They yield economic prospects for neighboring communities, enhance higher-value agricultural and industrial investment, and improve access to markets as well as health and social services.

Unfortunately, such projects also entail risks. Residents are often excluded from the benefits either because they lack awareness of the opportunities or they lack the skills that could make them direct beneficiaries. Additionally, as is frequently observed, residents can become vulnerable to unforeseen risks, such as human trafficking and the spread of HIV, which can result from the increased physical connectivity.

Bearing in mind both the rewards and risks of large-scale infrastructure projects, the 16-month project "Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment— Strengthening Capacity of Women Along the Central Mekong Delta Connectivity Project Phase II" was designed to prepare local communities for both income opportunities and potential adverse impacts with the forthcoming road construction in Dong Thap Province, in southern Viet Nam. With a total budget of \$400,000, the project began in June 2012 targeting women, both those who are married and younger single women who might out-migrate for employment.

The project set out to improve income-generating opportunities for women, promote gender equality, and enhance awareness of the risks related to human trafficking and HIV in eight communes located in two districts (Cao Lanh and Thap Muoi). Specifically, women from low-income households were targeted with vocational skills training and access to credit and employment placements. Simultaneously, the project emphasized building up institutional capacities for improving livelihood opportunities for women that would endure beyond the project.

Keywords

women, employment, Viet Nam, income, road construction

Comments

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Paving the Road to Better Income Options

Case Study on Promoting Women's Livelihood
and Employment Opportunities in Viet Nam





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How Road Construction Changes Communities



Infrastructure projects and road networks have the potential to catalyze socioeconomic change. They yield economic prospects for neighboring communities, enhance higher-value agricultural and industrial investment, and improve access to markets as well as health and social services.

Unfortunately, such projects also entail risks. Residents are often excluded from the benefits either because they lack awareness of the opportunities or they lack the skills that could make them direct beneficiaries. Additionally, as is frequently observed, residents can become vulnerable to unforeseen risks, such as human trafficking and the spread of HIV, which can result from the increased physical connectivity.

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Mekong Delta Connectivity Project Phase II” was designed to prepare local communities for both income opportunities and potential adverse impacts with the forthcoming road construction in Dong Thap Province, in southern Viet Nam. With a total budget of \$400,000, the project began in June 2012 targeting women, both those who are married and younger single women who might out-migrate for employment.

The project set out to improve income-generating opportunities for women, promote gender equality, and enhance awareness of the risks related to human trafficking and HIV in eight communes located in two districts (Cao Lanh and Thap Muoi). Specifically, women from low-income households were targeted with vocational skills training and access to credit and employment placements. Simultaneously, the project emphasized building up institutional capacities for improving livelihood opportunities for women that would endure beyond the project.

The project conducted preconstruction activities along the route of the planned road infrastructure development in southern Viet Nam. The road construction is undertaken in connection with the Central Mekong Delta Connectivity Project (CMDCP), implemented by the Government of Viet Nam starting in 2011. Phase II of the CMDCP is the construction of the My An to Cao Lanh connecting road, affecting eight communes across Cao Lanh and Thap Muoi districts in Dong Thap province. The principal project partners of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) were the Ministry of Transport, Cuu Long Corporation for Investment, Development and Project Management of Infrastructure, and International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Gender Analysis Reveals Women's Needs



Even though women and men had similar rates of economic participation in the project's eight communes, an initial project assessment of women's needs, constraints and aspirations highlighted a gender-based disparity in earnings: Women earned \$1,753 annually, compared with the \$2,304 that men earned. The pay gap likely related to the concentration of women in a typical gender-segregated pattern of low-skill, low-value and irregular livelihood activities, with the domestic care burden a major obstacle to women's mobility and capacity to access market opportunities. Additionally, women lacked skills or could not find jobs suited to whatever training they could avail. Constrained access to credit and limited business

planning skills and/or technical knowledge related to agriculture typically undermined livelihood investments, often leaving women in a debt cycle.

The assessment also found that many single young women sought work in factories, locally and in other provinces; the majority of them were unaware of their rights, which added to their vulnerability to exploitation and other abuses. Gaps in HIV and human trafficking awareness also rendered women in the project area vulnerable to new or increased risks associated with expanded transport infrastructure, particularly when seeking income-earning opportunities.





Targeting the Challenges

With three components (business development, employment support, and behavior change communication), the project set out to enhance rather than duplicate existing services. It also focused on building up the capability of partners (government and other service providers) in the eight communes to provide support to women while empowering them to take charge of their income-generating choices.

After mapping the relevant service providers within the provincial and district government departments, training institutions and the private sector, the project offered:

- (i) training to improve technical skills aligned to labor market needs, business development and management, and practical knowledge to facilitate market access for products;
- (ii) links with credit institutions and local service providers;
- (iii) help for women in accessing nonfarm employment locally, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises, through placements, subsidies, and other financial assistance; and
- (iv) outreach sessions on gender equality for women with spouses, with the aim of creating openness at home for women to have time for workshops, internships, and eventually earning income.

Exposure to basic business planning knowledge also preceded those training sessions to prepare the targeted groups for the subsequent livelihood training. The sequenced interventions created an environment conducive for women to then gain the necessary financial and technical skills to benefit from credit access later in the project.

The third component's communications campaign was designed to increase the beneficiaries' and their communities' understanding of risks associated with the spread of HIV and human trafficking and to generally equip women with information to better protect themselves against all risks associated with increased mobility into and out of their villages.

Primary Partner Selection Leverages Extensive Links with Local Service Providers

The Viet Nam Women's Union of Dong Thap Province was engaged as the primary partner so that the interventions would endure after the project ended. The Women's Union has a specific mandate for women's issues and significant experience in providing training and communication activities related to women's empowerment, income generation, counter-trafficking, and HIV and AIDS issues.



IMPACT AT A GLANCE

The project was eminently successful, based on the following impressive accomplishments:

- (i) A **33%** increase in the average monthly income of business development beneficiaries through increased productivity, higher-value products, improved financial management, and access to credit.
- (ii) A **118%** increase in the average monthly incomes of women in employment placement.
- (iii) Greater economic participation and income stability, with **57** women reentering the workforce or gaining a steady income for the first time through employment placement.
- (iv) Increased housework or child care support from family members and enhanced capacity of local project partners to support women's income-generating activities.
- (v) Greater understanding of HIV demonstrated, with **89%** of women surveyed able to correctly identify risk factors and means of prevention.

Training on Gender Equality Targets Mobility Challenges

Training for women and their spouses was designed to create an enabling environment for women to access work and livelihood opportunities. In addition to concepts of gender and equality, joint home care management training included technical information on managing home-based enterprises and increasing productivity as well as the practicality of sharing housework.

In postproject interviews, women reported that having their spouse involved helped them understand why they should support women's participation in training activities.

- 96 couples trained on gender equality and women's rights
- Increased men's support for women's income-generating activities



“When I attended the business development training, my husband did not question it. When I was away, he helped with household chores. I have learned a lot from the gender equality and livelihoods training, most importantly about the use of agricultural inputs and hazardous chemicals and managing household finance.”

—Sen from An Binh commune

- **322 women trained on business development**
- **319 women completed a business plan for a new or improved business**
- **71 women accessed credit**
- **33% increase in the average monthly income**

Business Development Training Targets Home-Based Options

The project trained women beneficiaries from poor households who had families and needed to stay at home, were interested in home-based livelihoods and wanted to start a new enterprise or expand their small business. The training included basic financial literacy, business planning skills to develop viable business plans, access to market opportunities, and management of financial resources—with the goal of teaching women how to avoid bad investments.

Training was first provided to 22 Women’s Union staff and 3 Vocational Training Centre trainers. In turn, the Women’s Union trainers set up 5-day workshops in the eight project communes. During the training and with guidance from the trainers, women developed an initial business plan that they subsequently refined and submitted to the Women’s Union. Of the 322 women trained, 319 each developed a business plan to set up or enhance a small business.



Pham Thi Dep Gains Business Savvy Plus Income Through Financial Literacy

“The training helped me to identify what the market might want from my business,” explains Pham Thi Dep, who owns a small bicycle repair service in My Quy commune. “I can also estimate the profit that I can expect from buying new equipment. The training has taught me to shop around for the best prices and develop a network of suppliers I can call. I feel really confident about expanding my business, and my husband is behind me, so I will use my business plan to apply for a D20 million loan from the Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies.” Since the training, Dep says her income has increased by 33%.

Through additional business plan finalization workshops, the trainers helped women refine their business plans for their credit application. Commune-level credit access workshops facilitated an introduction to local credit institutions, such as farmers' unions, the Agribank, and the Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies, as well as the Women's Union credit programs, which, unlike commercial banks, do not require collateral.

After the workshops, 71 women accessed a total of VND350 million (\$16,670) credit from the Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies and the Women's Union.

Technical Skills Training Targets Diversification

Of the 319 women who developed a business plan, 275 sought out further technical training. Technical skill courses covered handicrafts and weaving, animal husbandry, cultivation techniques (for fruit, mushrooms, rice, and vegetables), and aquaculture (eels, fish, frogs). The courses provided information on extension services and trader networks as well as contacts of trainers who can give women follow up support. Additional courses on business management and marketing were also provided.

The strategic combination of business development and technical training enabled women to diversify into higher-value production, increase business productivity, and improve their financial management. For example, women diversified their agricultural livelihood to focus on higher-value livestock farming, such as cattle, fish, and pigs. The technical training also enabled women to reduce losses and increase stock through better knowledge of disease prevention, vaccination, and crop and livestock management. This translated into improved access to credit and higher returns, with average monthly income in this group increasing by VND382,600 (\$18).

“

The trainees overall reported a 33% increase in the average monthly income through increased productivity, higher-value products, improved financial management, and access to credit. In the postproject interviews, all the participating women said they now understand about pricing, markets and determining that their production is viable.”

- 275 women trained on technical skills
- Average monthly income increased by \$18



The training activities led to:

Better business planning: Women can now better assess their costs, return on investment and profit, which has improved their management of capital. They now understand how to adjust their costs and selling prices to improve returns and better plan for additional credit.

Improved profitability and reduced losses: Women have diversified to higher-value products and have reduced risks through better knowledge of disease prevention and crop management and to improve their resource management.

Better market information: Women have learned about trader networks inside and outside their district that connected them to markets outside their residential district, which helps mitigate the difficulties they endure because of limited mobility.

MORE DUCKS, MORE MONEY FOR NGUYEN THI CAM NHUNG

Using the skills she learned on business planning and livestock production, Nguyen Thi Cam Nhung decided to expand her household duck-raising business in My Quy commune. After attending the subsequent credit access workshop, she applied for a VND3 million loan (\$141) from the Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies. She is confident with the production techniques she learned from the training and plans to double her duck production to at least 100 ducks in each production cycle. She calculates a profit margin of about VND4 million (\$188) that can be made in each cycle, leading to a total income of about VND12 million to VND16 million (\$565 to \$754) annually.



Some beneficiaries reported dramatic increases in monthly revenue, at more than 350%. The proportion of women earning less than \$25 a month decreased by 13%; the proportion of women earning more than \$48 a month increased by 17%.

Employment Support Targets Women Wanting Jobs Outside the Home

Employment support focused on creating channels for women to access decent, suitable work and diversify their income sources. Employment workshops were conducted with the Women's Union, the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA), and provincial employment agencies. Through these workshops, 57 young women who were seeking formal employment were provided with information on the labor market, training options, and job placements and were able to connect with support agencies. The training was followed by an introduction to a local employer so the women could discuss available positions and ask questions about job placements and constraints.

Based on an assessment of women's specific needs, subsidy packages provided funds to pay a minimum wage during the training to cover transport expenses and the training fee and to acquire equipment for women who wanted to take on home-based work. The support enabled women to enter employment with relatively small financial input.

LUU THI HUONG INCREASES DAILY INCOME BY 150% THROUGH SKILLS TRAINING



Luu Thi Huong was previously unable to access any training or employment because she has four young children, including 3-year-old twins, and she had no family nearby to help care for the children. She lives in a remote area in My Quy commune, thus transport was a major barrier. This left her with no option but to stay at home, where she earned less than \$1 per day peeling lotus seeds.

The project, through the Viet Nam Women's Union, helped arrange child care for Huong's twins with a household in the community during her internship with a nail salon. A subsidy package provided her with a bicycle for transport and covered the training fee and expenses for manicurist equipment. After the internship, she opened a beauty salon in her home. She does manicure services for about five clients a day, earning about \$2.50 a day, which is a 150% increase from her previous income.

A total of 57 women were placed in employment: 42 women as home-based workers with garment sewing, soccer ball production, and manicure services; and 15 women in local enterprises.

Of the 57 women, 31 had no previous income; the rest were engaged in either seasonal agricultural labor or manual processing for local production groups. The employment support allowed them to reenter regular employment. Women who opted for handicraft production secured a higher income and diversified their income source.

The employer outreach was instrumental in developing placement opportunities. Employer mapping, in conjunction with the subsidy support, created work opportunities for women and provided access to productive assets. The tailoring of the subsidy support packages was an overwhelmingly positive factor in minimizing the multiple constraints women experience. It enabled them to enter employment with relatively small financial input, averaging \$152 per worker.



- 57 women placed in employment
- Employment placements provided an average increase in income of 118%

In postproject interviews, women said they were happy with a stable income to supplement seasonal or irregular household incomes; they also liked the flexibility of combining paid work with agricultural activities. A majority of beneficiaries cited entry to home-based work, through access to placements and the equipment subsidy, as the most valuable aspect of the project assistance.

Behavioral Change Communication Targets Increased Protection for Women

An analysis of ways to communicate information for behavior change revealed that the general awareness of potential HIV risks was high among government officials and residents in the two project districts. Yet, those who were surveyed had little understanding of how worker mobility and migration can increase HIV risks, with some residents reflecting limited knowledge on modes of prevention. Local government officials were unaware of HIV and human trafficking risks that may be brought about by the construction of My An to Cao Lanh road, due to their unfamiliarity with such large-scale development projects.

Recognition of human trafficking at the district level was limited to cases of exploitation in international marriages. At the commune level, information on trafficking risks associated with labor migration was not publicized and nothing was done to minimize the risks. Women in the project area generally had low awareness of the risk of being trafficked within Viet Nam or the threat of exploitation or forced labor when seeking work, particularly through informal channels.

The project engaged more than 1,057 participants in awareness-enhancing activities to increase their understanding of HIV, AIDS, and human trafficking and to enable women to protect themselves better against risks associated with increased transport



By the end of the project, 89% of the women surveyed indicated accurate knowledge on HIV transmission and prevention. Some of the women interviewed also reported being active in spreading messages, such as the use of condoms, to family members and neighbors. Many parents now recognize risks of seeking work away from home (particularly for daughters) and are aware of safe practices. Families have begun taking precautions before sending a young person away to work, such as ensuring lines of communication.

- 89% of beneficiaries surveyed had accurate knowledge on HIV transmission and prevention
- Communication materials were incorporated into the activities of several government agencies



connectivity. Context-specific behavior change communication materials on HIV and trafficking were developed, and 20,000 leaflets were distributed. Training was provided to 27 Women's Union staff to reduce their gaps in knowledge on HIV risks and trafficking, build their communication skills, and equip them to deliver information workshops, train community volunteers, and facilitate discussions in communes on risks and safe behaviors.

Institution Building and Coordination Targets Interventions that Endure Beyond the Project

The project also focused on collaborating closely with local institutions, including the Viet Nam Women's Union, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, DOLISA and the Vocational Training Centers, to transfer knowledge and tools that would augment the institutionalization and thus a long lifespan of the project interventions.

Building institutional capacity to support women's livelihood development was a crucial task. The project area had a well-developed set of institutions to support livelihood development but they lacked relevant tools, capacity and coordination. For example, the Viet Nam Women's Union of Dong Thap Province, the agency responsible for supporting women's livelihoods in the project area, sponsors formal training and offers microcredit to women. But it does not help women transition from training to employment. Overall, local institutions fail to meet women's specific needs, such as connecting to community- or home-based jobs with flexible schedules. Nor do they concentrate on the challenges posed by limited mobility and limited access to training.

The project encouraged partners to first and foremost consider women's specific needs. For example, the project provided district and commune branches of the Viet Nam Women's Union with knowledge and training tools that they could use to deliver comprehensive ongoing support.

Training and support will be ongoing in the following areas:

- (i) promoting gender equality within households and for jobseekers;
- (ii) home business management and livelihood improvement;
- (iii) business development; and
- (iv) communication skills to raise awareness of HIV, AIDS, and human trafficking.



The project linked needs, training, and interventions to improve credit and service access and provided partners with a model to enable them to coordinate different agencies' services.

The interventions led to increased women's skills for livelihood improvements and enhanced access to services and resources. For small business development, the approach was to link access to credit with improved skills so women could plan and operate viable businesses. For women seeking employment, the project created pathways from training to work and provided marketable skills while overcoming barriers to employment.

Results



Women Gained Marketable Skills for Better Income-Generation Options

Women gained technical skills in business development, financial management, and agricultural production that led to reduced costs and higher return on capital investment. Several beneficiaries were able to earn a stable income for the first time through project-supported skills training, subsidized equipment, and technical assistance.

The combination of business development and technical training enabled women to diversify into higher-value production, increase business productivity, and improve the management of their financial resources. This integrated approach translated into improved access to credit and higher returns, with some beneficiaries reporting dramatic increases in revenue of more than 350%.

Beneficiaries are Now Able to Better Assess Market Opportunities and Manage Financial Resources, Leading to Livelihood Improvements

Through the creation of links between business development and technical training, beneficiaries gained access to information on trader networks and price setting, allowing them to generate greater profits. This coordination of business development and credit support also provided women with a better understanding of how credit application procedures can help leverage business opportunities.

Women Improved the Level and Regularity of their Income

Women gained access to regular employment with significantly higher earning potential. The average monthly income of several beneficiaries doubled

NGUYEN CAM INCREASES HER PIG PRODUCTION FOURFOLD

Nguyen Cam of Nhi My commune owned a small business raising pigs, usually producing about three animals per cycle. The training on animal husbandry enabled her to learn and apply breeding techniques. Through the training on business development, she also learned to reduce her expenses and calculate profit margins to enable her to develop a plan to invest extra returns into expanding her business. As a result, her animal production increased to 12 animals per cycle—a fourfold increase in productivity.



from a preproject average of \$19 to \$41. Placements also increased women's economic participation, with several beneficiaries who had no income at the start of the project now earning a regular income. In the postproject interviews, women highlighted greater income stability as an important benefit of the placement.

Flexible Working Arrangements and Greater Support from Men Reduced Barriers for Women

A lack of opportunities for women with family responsibilities had always posed a major limitation to their prospects for financial independence. Prior to the project-initiated flexible work arrangement, several women had been compelled to leave formal employment. These women were able to reenter regular employment.

Awareness of HIV Risks and Human Trafficking Increased

Of the women surveyed after the project ended, 95% correctly identified modes of HIV transmission and 89% identified a range of behaviors to prevent HIV transmission. Beneficiaries also demonstrated actions to reduce human trafficking risks, such as taking safety precautions before travelling and seeking reliable information on employment offers.

Links with Local Institutions Strengthened, and the Capacity of the Women's Union, Government Institutions, and Other Agencies Enhanced

Links among the various government agencies were strengthened so they could better respond to women's needs. The project strategy was conceptualized and validated in partnership with these local agencies. For example, using the needs assessment of beneficiaries as a guide, different agencies shared information and made training and equipment more accessible for women seeking home-based work. This led to increased understanding of women's business development needs and enabled agencies to mainstream livelihood development and market access information into ongoing meetings in project communes.

All the training materials were developed in consultation with these partners and institutionalized within the regular programs or service delivery activities. This enhanced ownership and sustainability of the project interventions. The Women's Union gained a range of training tools to strengthen women's capacities for earning income.

Commune representatives are now able to synthesize the different materials for communications campaigns,

VIET NAM WOMEN'S UNION GAINS BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING SKILLS



“We were really pleased with the business development training of trainers for our staff. We now have another very strong set of skills we can rely on to train women in the province. The feedback from beneficiaries was really positive, so we will surely repeat this kind of training once the project closes.”

—Nguyen Thi Hien, Vice-chair, Dong Thap
Viet Nam Women's Union

the goal of which is behavior change. Women's Union officers stated that the provision of participatory training methods and materials by the project was an effective approach and reported that the skills acquired by their staff improved its capacity to provide training and support to low-income households.

Several of the Project's Activities Institutionalized

The behavior change communication methods, messaging and materials were mainstreamed into regular, ongoing community meetings and disseminated through other government agencies to a wider audience after the project ended.

Staff at the Viet Nam Women's Union are now selecting training content to be mainstreamed into regular, ongoing Women's Union meetings and training programs.

Significant Changes in Gender Relations Acknowledged

Participants reported improvements in their household as a result of the gender equality and technical training, with their husbands becoming more willing to share domestic workloads. Women also expressed

greater confidence and recognition of their rights to explore employment and training opportunities.

The project demonstrated the benefits of women's economic participation to their husbands and the community and enabled women to have greater control over their income and economic activities.

Communications Campaign for Behavioral Change Improved

The communications materials integrated well with regular nonproject meetings, and staff used project materials and skills to mainstream information on HIV,



AIDS and human trafficking into other activities. For example, the Women's Union in Thap Muoi District collaborated with the Transportation Safety Board, the police and the Department of Social Evils Prevention to include the HIV, AIDS, and human trafficking content in traffic safety classes in 12 communes, including 5 of the project's targeted communes.

There is collaboration across provincial, district, and commune levels for large-scale campaigns employing effective communications channels. Staff reported an improved ability to create clear messages that communicate in a way that is easily understood by targeted groups.



What Similar Projects Should Consider

The following are useful insights that emerged as the project's implementation rolled out.

- ▶ Improving business planning and diversification of livelihoods are effective options for women to increase incomes, particularly older women who are already engaged in a business.
- ▶ Improving technical knowledge is central to increasing productivity and diversifying women's agricultural activities. But consideration should be given to accessibility and community-based mentoring to increase effectiveness.
- ▶ Clearer business planning, access to credit and market information, and interventions that increase options to balance work and family responsibilities or diversify livelihoods with added-value activities are key to generating higher incomes and ensuring that women efficiently utilize credit to improve their livelihood.
- ▶ Increasing opportunities for women to move up the value chain has significant potential to increase incomes.
- ▶ Continued promotion of gender equality jointly with men and women, in particular women's economic participation, remains relevant and should be linked with practical actions for households. In addition, sustained gender awareness training is crucial in changing gender norms and attitudes that continue to limit women's choices and opportunities.
- ▶ Interventions such as arranging child care within the communities help women with childcare obligations to allow them to seek income-earning options.
- ▶ Consultation and capacity building of local institutions and stakeholders are critical for building support, ownership, and sustainability.

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