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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

<u>Background:</u> Phase 2 of the Oxfam Mekong Water Governance Inclusion Project (IP2) has been implemented since mid-2020 by Oxfam in consortium with International Rivers (IR). The project is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and since 2021 the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) and with a No-Cost Extension agreed to April 2025.

IP2 succeeded IP1, which ran from 2014 to 2020, funded by DFAT for a total of \$A9 million as a core investment of DFAT's Greater Mekong Water Resources Program 2014-2020 (GMWRP) with Oxfam as the sole implementing agency. Original timeframe of IP2 was from June 2020 to June 2024, with a No-Cost Extension to April 2025 later agreed. Total investment in IP2 was AUD 5,431,705 by DFAT, and USD 3,467,281 from the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The project was delivered by a consortium of Oxfam and International Rivers until June 2024, and by Oxfam from July 2024 to final conclusion in April 2025.

The Inclusion Project aims to achieve more inclusive, equitable and sustainable water governance that reduces the impact of climate change and increases social accountability to citizens in the Greater Mekong region. The program envisions that communities living in the Mekong and Salween River basins are able to realise their right to sustainable livelihoods.

The IP2 project has three key interlocking domains of change.

- 1. Social inclusion, Gender equality and women's leadership
- 2. Civil society engagement and networking
- 3. Government and the private sector, fully articulated in the project's theory of change.

These are fully articulated in the three End of Project Outcomes detailed below:

<u>Evaluation Purpose</u>: The end of project evaluation was commissioned with the following objectives:

- 1. To evaluate the impacts of the Inclusion Project Phase 2 per the Theory of Change and Theory of Action as both were revised for the No-Cost Extension to April 2025,
- 2. To evaluate the extent to which project approaches and strategies contributed to the project's final outcomes and impacts
- 3. To identify lessons learned from the project for Oxfam, International Rivers and their partners and to develop recommendations for continuing program work in the key domains of change.

The evaluation was conducted by a team of three: Mark Deasey (Team Leader); Bounthavivanh Mixap and Vo Thi Tam, all of whom had substantial prior engagement with Oxfam's inclusion work in the Mekong sub-region.

<u>Methodology</u>: The Evaluation was managed by IP2's Project Management Unit (PMU), with oversight from a Reference Group including representatives from DFAT, SDC, Oxfam and International Rivers. The evaluation proceeded with preparation of an Inception Report, followed

by review of the extensive documentation produced throughout the project, and data collection with key stakeholders across the region. Extensive face-to-face Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) including direct community contact were carried out in Vietnam and Cambodia. In Laos, due to the lack of an official project MoU, data collection was largely confined to KIIs with key stakeholders in Vientiane. Contact with Thai, regional and Myanmar stakeholders was via online interviews.

Emphasis was placed on applying a gender lens to the evaluation, consonant with the purpose and structure of IP2 overall.

<u>Limitations:</u> The most important factors noted were:

- Impossibility of ensuring <u>balance</u> in focus between the different countries and stakeholders in the region, due to factors including security (Myanmar); restrictions on movement and direct interaction with programme work in the field (Laos, Vietnam); also the relative scale of current project activity in each country. This was partly mitigated by use of distance communications to conduct interviews with stakeholders in those locations.
- Continued difficulties in obtaining direct input with <u>private sector actors</u>, as has been documented as an issue throughout IP2 (and IP1) implementation.
- Fewer interviews with government actors than was hoped for; although important data was gathered from local government officials in Laos and Vietnam; and from national-level officials in Cambodia.
- Interviews sought but not obtained with a small number of stakeholders, several of them key to regional-level activity of IP2, and two being national government figures.
- The Evaluation Team unable to meet in person throughout the process, due to constraints of timetables and budget. This was significantly mitigated by strategic use of distance communications, voice and written.

Document Review: IP2 has been noticeably more comprehensively documented than the first project phase (2016 – 2020), and with an increased depth of analysis. Particularly valuable in framing the evaluation was the Political and Economic Analysis (PEA) of the operating context in the Mekong sub-region, in both the original version, and the refreshed version delivered in May 2024; also specific documents for GEDSI planning, and the introduction of Outcome Harvesting as part of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) framework. Important contextual and implementation elements emerging from the document review included the trend to increasingly authoritarian government and tightened central control across the region and concomitant narrowing of civil society space; the resilience and creativity of civil society actors in the changing environment, and the agility of IR, Oxfam and IP2 partners in working through available channels and platforms. The emergence of new non-hydro renewable energy (RE) generation technologies as a potentially disruptive factor to hydro- and fossil fuel power generation has been significant, as has increasing government and public consciousness on the impacts of climate change, on the river systems and more broadly.

The evaluation interrogated the Theory of Change (ToC) and Theory of Action (ToA) in the light of both PEA documentation per both the original and refreshed versions, and experience of project implementation as expressed by key informants. Individual elements are explored further under

each of the component Outcomes and detailed in the Findings. Broadly, the implementation strategy chosen appears appropriate, and was pursued with nuance and flexibility. Important progress has been made in all three Outcome areas designated, but the stated Outcome 3, of achieving commitment to major change in government and private sector compliance with international standards in hydropower and renewable energy generation, appears optimistic in the current political and economic context of the region, and in IP2's timeframe, although noting that this Outcome was originally set for an eight-year period, in which further progress could be expected.

Key observations and findings per Outcome were:

Outcome 1: Women leaders and representatives of marginalised social groups are playing leadership roles in influencing national and regional state and non-state actors in WRG and energy policy and planning processes

IP2 appears to have achieved a very high level of success in certain aspects; although it is notable that the level has varied considerably across different countries of the region. Continuity from IP1 and the initial fostering of women leaders appears to have been significant in this. Important new directions and strategies have been applied with partners and communities (where access was possible), most notably through different forms of Community Action Research, including the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach as most prominent with regard to Outcome 1,, and in Laos, the Sao Baan (People of the Village) research methodology; The Tai Baan approach, from which Sao Baan was modified, in Thailand, and the People's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) on the Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project. Partners, communities and individuals who had engaged with this reported major change in women's roles and confidence in leadership; community cohesion and solidarity; and ability to articulate community concerns and advocate with authorities. This has been complemented by a holistic strategy to support women's resilience and continued development in leadership, based on recognition of the realities of women's roles and social position. Establishing national and regional peer networks of women leaders has been one critical element of this.

Advances were made in CSO and other partner consistent use and reporting of gender analysis and impact in their work; also government and private sector agencies using Gender Impact Assessment in their planning and strategy, but at lower rates than initially targeted.

The project also appears to have consistently enabled the inclusion of young women and indigenous women in community organisation and leadership, with proper incorporation of the principles of intersectionality. Inclusion of people with disability (PwD) and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE) has been less consistent, but some important initiatives and achievements were noted, which could be the basis for more widespread good practice in the future.

Achievements have been uneven across the region, due to factors including government oversight and control of available organising and training space; security (particularly in the case of Myanmar); and the level of pre-existing understanding of gender equity principles by partners and communities. Also, it is noted that women leaders' engagement with authorities and key actors in water resource governance has been most consistent at the local and sub-national level to date, although with some important instances in practice of linking local knowledge and concerns to national and regional advocacy. In Thailand, a higher degree of national engagement

by women leaders from partners and communities was achieved with government, statutory and private sector bodies, More consistent, joined-up, bridging of this gap would be a priority for future work on inclusion in water resource governance.

Outcome 2: Riverine communities and civil society actors are engaging with and influencing subnational, national and regional WRG policy and planning processes, and promoting the interests and rights of vulnerable social groups.

Direct engagement with sub-national, national and regional WRG policy and planning processes has certainly been strongly and consistently enabled throughout IP2. It is less easy to ascertain or assert the level of influence which has so far resulted. As with Outcome 1 above, engagement has been most readily observable at local to sub-national level, and it is also at that level that influence can be fairly claimed to have been achieved. Significant instances of direct engagement by communities and CSOs to national level are noted, and elsewhere, important progress has been achieved in linking the local to national and regional levels, through CSO umbrella bodies; providing space for women and other community leaders in national and regional fora.

Some important new strategies have been introduced and mainstreamed in response to assessment of what the most accessible channels of engagement are, and what is most likely to result in response. These have included:

- Effective use of both traditional and new media, to amplify community voice, including regular briefings, media trips and focused training of journalists where relatively open media conditions allow, and further engagement with f the IP2-supported Women on Air program on the small independent Women's Voice Radio in Cambodia to optimise very narrow available media space and give direct public voice to women community leaders and their concerns. This has been complemented by optimising of social media channels for 'soft advocacy', in recognition of government sensitivity to public opinion, even in undemocratic contexts.
- The importance of building an evidence base, integrated into community action research methodologies e.g. FPAR, Sao Baan, People's EIA etc and also collaborations with academic institutions and government researchers; and using this evidence as the basis for engagement.
- Deeper and more consistent engagement with the Mekong River Commission Secretariat (and MRC Development Partners, particularly the TROIKA), and the linked Cambodia National Mekong Committee Secretariat, as both have displayed greater openness to civil society voices. IR, Oxfam and partners' engagement and influence can be seen as both result and cause of the greater openness.

Outcome 3 Target government and private sector actors at the national and regional levels increasingly commit to comply with regional and international standards and good practice: and include the perspectives of civil society in hydropower and RE policies and plans

From both the review of documentation and engagement with key stakeholders, it seems clear that there is relatively little firm evidence that increased compliance by government and the private sector has been gained through IP2, although noting that this Outcome was set with an eight-year timeframe in view. Against the adjustment of the original Outcome for the NCE period, to *commitment* to comply, considerably more progress has been made, and is detailed below.

At the same time, it does seem that important progress has been made on several fronts, particularly opening of channels for dialogue and influence, and that this could work towards a critical mass for future influence, particularly in the event that greater democratic openness occurs in one or more government; that the poor fiscal outcomes of hydropower investment become clearer; and/or that greater pressure comes from a more aware and concerned public for sustainable energy options.

Particularly noted from IP2 experience have been:

- Gender equity, and GEDSI becoming an increasingly open point for engagement with government policy across the region on a wide range of issues.
- Greater receptiveness of Thai banks to considerations of environmental impact, and financial risk, in hydropower development.
- Opening of new channels of influence with the Lao national government, despite civil society space remaining highly constrained. .
- Increased openness of the Cambodian government to non-hydro renewable energy initiatives, on both local and large scale.
- Diverse channels of engagement and influence with Thai institutions and actors, including on plans and projects related to Thai outbound investments

Concerted IP2 engagement with RE approaches and solutions commenced only in 2023, and results are relatively sparse to date.

However, there has been strong positive comment from other actors on the approaches taken by IR, Oxfam and IP2 partners in using available channels and strategies for influence, and continued application could reasonably be assumed to contribute to more tangible results regarding both policy and practice.

Assessment against the OECD-DAC Criteria:

Issues relating to project design, management and implementation approach are addressed principally under these:

Regarding <u>Effectiveness</u> and <u>Efficiency</u> we note the high value-add of IR and Oxfam working in concert on this project, with strong complementary strengths including depth of experience, partnership networks and long experience of engaging from community to regional level in the region. The consortium structure was found to be cumbersome, however, and significantly increased transactional costs. Support from both SDC and DFAT has amplified the resource base, relationship with other development initiatives in the region and reach of the project, but also resulted in higher demands on resources to meet accountability requirements.

Oxfam's complex internal architecture has in some instances worked against efficiency, particularly with regard to relationships between the PMU and country teams. In Laos particularly, it has been a contributing factor to diminished project impact and effectiveness, while substantially raising transactional costs.

<u>Coherence</u> of the project has been questioned, given very different levels of reach and modes of implementation across the different countries of the region; also the gaps in linkage from activity

at grassroots level to national and regional engagement. Assessment through this evaluation would indicate that highly disparate elements have been combined towards a unified approach; that gaps are recognised and are being addressed, though further work is clearly needed; and in particular, that women and men at the grassroots do recognise strong commonalities of circumstance and priority. This has been most notably evident through national and regional gatherings engaging grassroots leaders, and the continued networking which has continued from these.

Consciousness of <u>sustainability</u> has been evident, particularly through investment in and empowerment of local communities, organisations and networks, and development of their mutual support, as well as optimising of in-region expertise within Oxfam and IR. However, it also seems clear that some continued resourcing of local actors and networks will be required if current momentum is to be maintained. This should include more concerted advocacy to governments for support to community bodies which in fact align with official policy.

Relevance of the project is utterly clear, as expressed by all stakeholders engaged with. While there is continuing uncertainty around the extent of achievability of Outcome 3 – presuming a further phase of the Inclusion Project to span the projected eight-year time frame, given political trends within the region, it seems clear that the promotion of women's leadership, the fuller inclusion of marginalised communities and population groups, and the enabling of civil society will remain critically important in the dynamically evolving context of the region

Recommendations:

The following recommendations have been formulated with the assumption that substantial institutional donor funding will be available for a continuation either of the Inclusion Project, or a coherent regional program of closely related work.

For Future Program Design:

- 1. The model to promote and support women's leadership as developed through IP2 should be specifically documented and shared more widely for possible adaptation and use beyond the countries where it has been most visibly used, and possibly in other program contexts. This should also be integral to any future phase of the Inclusion Project.
- A clearer and more coherent strategy for the inclusion of people with disability, people
 of diverse SOGIE, and other marginalised groups, drawing on the diverse examples of
 successful practice in IP2 should be developed for any future phase of the Inclusion
 Project. OPDs and organisations of people with diverse SOGIE should be directly engaged
 in this design.
- 3. Avenues to ensure the continued resourcing of community fishery groups and other grassroots structures and networks, independent of institutional donors, need to be explored as a priority, particularly advocacy for in-country government funding
- 4. The significant differences in political and economic context and in available civil society space in each country need to be specifically articulated in developing a Theory of Change for any future phase of the Incluson Project, and also clearly reflected in the design of the Theory of Action. .
- 5. Design of a future phase of the Inclusion Project should include clear articulation as to how the successful enabling of local-level leadership, engagement and influence can more consistently fully linked up to engagement and influence at national and regional

- levels; also respecting the differing national circumstances and constraints as per Recommendation 4 above.
- 6. A more detailed strategy for the promotion and support of Renewable Energy initiatives from local to regional level should be developed as part of any future program, particularly looking to possible engagement with other DFAT-supported initiatives in the region.
- 7. Lessons learned from engagement with social and 'old' media across the region within the IP2 implementation period should be documented and analysed to develop a component strategy for future intervention.
- 8. Lessons learned from collaboration with academia, as both a direct channel of influence, and a partner in empowering community development of evidence for influence, should likewise be documented for future strategy development.

Operational and Structural Issues:

- 9. The disjuncture between Oxfam regional project management structure and the autonomy of individual Oxfam country teams must be addressed inf any future regional program,.
- 10. Oxfam should discuss internally and with donors ways in which current operational management and accountability workload could be streamlined and possibly redistributed to allow greater engagement of management level staff in matters of program strategy and quality.



2. BACKGROUND

This evaluation was commissioned for the completion of Phase 2 of the Oxfam Mekong Inclusion Project (IP2), which runs from mid-2020 to April 2025, and succeeded the first phase (IP1) which ran from 2014 to 2020. The Inclusion Project forms part of the broader Oxfam Mekong Regional Water Governance Program (MRWGP), implemented for over a decade, and which recognises the issue of water governance as critical to the rights and livelihoods of people in the Mekong sub-region. This further builds on Oxfam work linking water governance, rights and livelihoods in the region which has been conducted since the early 1990s.

IP2 succeeded IP1, which ran from 2014 to 2020, funded by DFAT for a total of \$A9 million as a core investment of DFAT's Greater Mekong Water Resources Program 2014-2020 (GMWRP) with Oxfam as the sole implementing agency. Original timeframe of IP2 was from June 2020 to June 2024, with a No-Cost Extension to April 2025 later agreed. Total investment in IP2 was AUD 5,431,705 by DFAT, and USD 3,467,281 from the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The project was delivered by a consortium of Oxfam and International Rivers until June 2024, and by Oxfam from July 2024 to final conclusion in April 2025.

The MRWGP aims to achieve more inclusive, equitable and sustainable water governance that reduces the impact of climate change and increases social accountability to citizens in the Greater Mekong region. The program envisions that communities living in the Mekong and Salween River basins are able to realise their right to sustainable livelihoods.

The IP2 project has three interlocking end of Project Outcomes as modified in the May 2024 No-Cost Extension proposal:

> Women leaders and representatives of marginalised social groups are playing leadership roles in influencing national and regional state and non-state actors in WRG and energy policy and

planning processes

- Riverine communities and civil society actors are engaging with and influencing sub-national, national and regional WRG and RE policy and planning processes and promoting the interests and rights of vulnerable social groups
- Target Government and Private Sector actors at the national and regional levels increasingly commit to comply with international standards and best practice; and engage with & include the perspectives of civil society in hydropower and RE policies and plans

IP2 has been delivered by Oxfam and International Rivers (IR) in consortium to June 2024, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) from June 2020, and the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation from September 2021. A No-Cost Extension to April 2025 was approved by both donors. For the NCE period, International Rivers laid down its consortium role, and has continued as a regional partner of Oxfam.

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The end of project evaluation was commissioned with the following objectives:

- 1. To evaluate the impacts of the Inclusion Project Phase 2 per the revised Theory of Change and Theory of Action, ascertaining the factors both contributing to success, and in reducing any final achievement and impact
- 2. To evaluate the extent to which project approaches and strategies contributed to the project's final outcomes and impacts
- 3. To identify lessons learned from the project for Oxfam, International Rivers and their partners, to develop recommendations for continuing program work in inclusion, civil society strengthening, and policy work in water governance and renewable energy development.

Primary users of the evaluation findings and recommendations will be the consortium partners, in considering their future programming in this thematic area, and the two donors, in planning their further investment in Water Resource Governance (WRG) in the Mekong sub-region.

The Evaluation Team: The team of Mark Deasey (Team Leader), Bounthavivanh Mixap and Vo Thi Tam (Consultants) was appointed following an open competitive process. The team combined has several decades of experience in designing, implementing and reviewing rights-based development projects in the Mekong, and shares fluency in four languages of the region. Mark Deasey and Vo Thi Tam were engaged in the final evaluation of IP1, and Bounthavivanh Mixap was engaged during IP1 for the development and application of the Gender Impact Assessment tool. The team acknowledges a positive bias towards the strategy and activities of Oxfam and IR, given substantial previous engagement as Oxfam staff and consultants. This potential bias has been explicitly acknowledged from the outset in dialogue with the Project Management Unit and the wider Evaluation Reference Group, with the expectation that ERG and PMU would be alert to manifestations of this through skewing of methodology or presentation of findings and recommendations, and critique accordingly.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The proposed evaluation methodology was set out in the Inception Report approved by the Evaluation Reference Group (ERG) and implemented with some minor modifications. The key stages were:

- Following granting of contract, initial consultation with the Project Management Unit (PMU)
- Document review. This commenced immediately on finalisation of contract, and has
 continued through the data collection and analysis period. This was due to significant
 documents still being under preparation during the data collection period, including the
 revised Political and Economic Analysis, the IP2 GEDSI audit, and the report of the
 Women and Rivers Congress; as well as gaps in the initial compilation provided.
- Preparation of the Inception Report, including full Methodology and proposed data collection tools. An initial draft was revised on advice from PMU; submitted to the ERG, and revised version approved on 4th July 2024. This included a response to the initial stage of the document review.
- Data collection and analysis began in early July and continued until early September, with final KIIs being conducted after submission of the first draft report. Details of process by country and stakeholder type are given below.
- Preparation of the first draft report began 2nd August, overlapping with the final phase of data collection. Some variation to the process as per Terms of Reference took place. In particular, a fully articulated list of Key Questions and Sub-questions, based entirely on the OECD-DAC criteria was provided by the Steering Group. This was at variance with the DFAT evaluation standards, which stipulate that key questions should be discussed and finalised between the client and the evaluator, and also be more limited in number.

3.1 Data collection approaches per country and type

In-country data collection took place in Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia, with the latter including interviews with most members of the PMU. Some interviews in each of these countries were conducted online, due to specific logistical issues. All engagement with partners and other stakeholders in Thailand and Myanmar was online only. This was first, because of the prime focus of the 2023 Mid-Term Review of IP2 on these two countries; and secondly because security conditions precluded direct in-country data collection in Myanmar.

In <u>Lao PDR</u>, IP2 has had to operate without an MoU with the national government (issue explored further below), which precluded any direct visits by the consultant to community locations. This meant that all data collection took the form of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs) in Vientiane, with partners of Oxfam and IR, and other national stakeholders.

In <u>Vietnam</u>, it was possible to meet with the partner, People We Work With (PWWW) and government counterparts in A Luoi, Thua Tien Hue. A visit to DRAGON, the IP2 research partner located within Can Tho University was also arranged, and allowed for several individual interviews with staff, students participating in DRAGON-supported research, and government counterparts. Staff of Oxfam in Vietnam coincided with the consultant on the delta visit, allowing for in-depth conversations within the schedule. Just one interview with a national partner

(CEWAREC) was conducted online to spare a trip to Hanoi, as there was no possibility of visiting the project site in the field.

<u>Cambodia</u> offered the widest scope of engagement, given the absence of regulatory controls over access to project areas, partners and communities. Interviews were conducted in person and online in Phnom Penh with national partners and stakeholders, as well as with all members of the PMU, and Oxfam in Cambodia (OiC), followed by visits to partners and communities in Kratie, Stung Treng and Ratanakiri provinces. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with PWWW were conducted in all provincial locations. (NB that the term 'People We Work With/PWWW is used consistently as both more comprehensive and respectful than 'participants' or 'beneficiaries')

<u>Thai and Regional partners</u> were engaged online only; with Key Informant Interviews with stakeholder representatives, including CSOs and academic institutions and individual stakeholders

<u>Myanmar</u>: Online interviews were conducted with staff of Oxfam in Myanmar, and staff of two Myanmar CSO partners).

A full list of partners, stakeholders and community members engaged with is given at Attachment 3. This includes indication of those whom it was recommended to interview, but did not respond after several attempts at contact. Having interviewed over 90% of those partners and other stakeholders recommended by Oxfam and International Rivers at inception, the evaluation team considers that the findings arising from interviews conducted, and triangulated with project documentation, can be deemed credible.

3.2. Limitations

The issue of <u>balance</u> within a regionally-focused project has been periodically raised throughout the implementation of IP2, and the issue was to a large degree reflected in the focus of the Evaluation. Ideally, project activity would have been distributed evenly, or in proportion to populations affected by changes to the Mekong and Salween river systems. As is further detailed below, the much more significant determinants have been the extent of available civil society space in each country and government regulations and oversight covering project implementation and access by external agencies.

The issue of balance also arises in relation to the range of stakeholders interviewed. Limited engagement with <u>private sector</u> actors has been noted in periodic project reports, and in the Mid-Term Review. This was consistent with experience during IP1 and renewed efforts in IP2 did not significantly change the pattern. A relatively small number of private sector actors were interviewed for the evaluation, and further detail of the constraints are detailed below.

<u>Government:</u> a relatively small number of government officials were interviewed. In Vietnam there was engagement with seven officials from provincial to commune level (two provincial officers in Thua Thien Hue, two district officers in A Lưới; three commune leaders in Hong Kim, Hong Thuong and Quang Nam commune. In Cambodia, interviews were conducted with three national level officials;\ In Laos, there was one meeting with staff of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, informal interactions with others at the IJET forum, and distance interviews with several sub-national officials – the last-mentioned as triangulation of information provided by a CSO partner working in their area. A meeting was unsuccessfully sought with one Lao Member of the

National Assembly, although this was partly counterbalanced by were partner reports on the Lao National Dialogue, which involved high level of policy makers including members of the National Assembly. More systematic triangulation with sub-national government agencies which had been the direct targets of influencing was initially planned, particularly for Cambodia, but did not eventuate, with the noted exception of Laos above; and with local officials in A Luoi (Vietnam). As is stated further below, the project in implementation has experienced a split between those areas of government which are accessible to dialogue and influencing, and those which make the most significant decisions, and this was reflected in access for the evaluation – this was flagged in the Inception Report as a likely feature.

Interviews were sought, but not obtained (after multiple attempts at contact) by a total of xx stakeholders across the region, out of a total of xxx initially targeted. The sample of stakeholders interviewed therefore represents the maximum number of those who could be reached and engaged in each country, and relating to each thematic Outcome, rather than a calculated balance.

Constraints of both budget and time commitments meant that the Evaluation Team communicated entirely at distance, and there were limited opportunities for all three members to meet and confer synchronously. This was somewhat counterbalanced by constant bilateral communication through the data collection and analysis period; three-way meetings to deliberate at all key stages of the process, use of a dedicated WhatsApp group for daily interaction and checking, and of shared document drive for maximum possible transparency and sharing of all stages of documentation.

3.3. Applying a Gender Lens to the evaluation process:

The Terms of Reference required that a gender lens be integrated into the evaluation. This was relatively straightforward given the explicitly gender-transformative aim of the project, and integration of gender/GEDSI objectives and activities throughout the design. Project documentation, including original proposals, the IP2 GEDSI Strategic Framework periodic reports and several of the Most Significant Change stories gathered for Outcome Harvesting provided a particularly strong initial data—set. Annual reports also include fully gender-disaggregated data and analysis. The project GEDSI Audit was underway at the same time as the Evaluation, and findings of the report, due in September, were intended be integrated into the final draft of this evaluation report; but final timetabling meant that this has unfortunately not been possible.

Where direct engagement with communities has been possible, there has been prioritisation of women leaders as key informants, and focus groups predominantly or solely of women. Design of the basic tools for data collection referred to the Gender at Work quadrilateral, outlining the domains of individual and collective, formal and informal factors bearing on gender norms and pathways to transformation, and this has helped to frame the findings under Outcome 1, regarding women's leadership and voice.

The team was very cognisant of the concept of intersectionality; that gender intersects with factors of ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation and others in driving identity and position within community. In pursuing data collection with partners and PWWW in the field, the team sought to integrate questions regarding inclusion of people with disability and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity or expression or sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Several individual examples were given both of inclusion of specific individuals, and approaches to inclusion broadly. These do point to possible future strategies for greater

inclusion, but cannot be claimed to give a full analysis of understanding and practice of intersectionality across the project..

3.4. Data Collection Tools, Key Questions and Process

As noted above, a fully articulated set of Key Questions and Sub-Questions to was provided to the evaluation team at time of drafting of the Inception Report. These had been prepared as part of the ToR and reviewed and approved by the Steering Committee. The Key Questions were based fully on the seven OECD-DAC criteria for evaluation; but this approach did not fully comply with the DFAT guidelines for independent evaluation, first in terms of numbers (ideally no more than five), secondly in terms of process, which indicates that key questions should be finalised in consultation between the client and the evaluator. A full set of data collection tools was nonetheless developed with reference to the Key Questions as provided, and submitted with the Inception Report, which was signed off by the ERG. These did guide the information sought through the data collection process; but were not necessarily applied in the format as originally presented. Team members used their own judgement to adjust questioning approaches in each circumstance, in order to ensure that the report could give meaningful reference to the IP2 projected Outcomes and Theory of Change; to steer around likely political sensitivities which could be triggered by direct questioning; and to accommodate nuances in the language used for each specific interview.

Our approach particularly sought to allow stakeholders, particularly at the community level, to drive the discourse and to highlight what for them had been most important in their experience of the project. This led in most cases to opening with very general questions, allowing women and men to take the conversation in the direction they felt was most important, and with the evaluator following up with further questions to clarify and amplify issues of most direct pertinence to the evaluation.

4. FINDINGS OF DOCUMENT REVIEW

IP2 has been a particularly well- and clearly documented project, with a large set of documents provided for review at the outset, and further added to throughout the process as missing documents were chased, and initiatives completed. A full set of documents consulted is provided at Attachment 2. Beyond the standard suite of proposals (original and for No-Cost Extension) and periodic reports, documents of most significant value included the Political and Economy Analysis, in both original (2021) and refreshed (2024) formats; the Partner Reflection Report; Report of the Mid-Term Review; reports of Regional Learning Events,; GEDSI strategic framework; findings of the Partner Capacity Assessment; the full set of Outcome Harvesting stories as gathered to date and individual country reports.

Overall there was a notably greater volume and evidence of more thorough analysis applied in comparison to IP1. Documentation as available at inception gave a strong base for the evaluation team to work from..

Significant in informing the approach of this evaluation was the <u>Cost Effectiveness Analysis of</u> the project "Investing in women's leadership and civil society organisation engagement in <u>transboundary river water governance in the Mekong region</u> commissioned by SDC in 2021, with its emphasis on the approach required to assess qualitative change.

The evaluation was also informed by both the findings of the 2013 Mid-Term Review and the management response to the document.

Documented Changes in Implementation Context: The original comprehensive Political and Economy Analysis (PEA) clearly served as a sound contextual foundation for planning of the project. Given the project's intended Outcome of achieving greater responsiveness to and integration of community voices in policy and planning by both government and private sector, this seemed to be a necessary and responsible step, and is explored further in the response to the project Theory of Change below. It is noted also that the 2024 refreshed version of the PEA, reviewing the changes in implementation, directly informed the modifications in strategy for the No-Cost Extension period. The above both pointed to the need to interrogate the assumptions in the Theory of Change/Theory of Action as set out below.

The impacts of the Covid pandemic are detailed; both in the immediate instance of slowing and altering project communication and implementation during periods of restricted movement, and ill health of personnel, and in the knock-on effects of increased government control of public and civil society space, whether intentionally under cover of public health requirements, or as an unintended side-effect. These are addressed in several sections of the Report below, as having had major effects on the achievability of all the three original End of Project Outcomes. .

Further key contextual factors identified in the PEA were:

- The trend to more authoritarian state control, , whether officially one-party or de facto, following the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, further tightening of control by the Cambodian People's Party, and enduring political dominance of the Thai military.
- Resulting restrictions on civil society space across the region, though with widely varying manifestations from country to country.
- Despite the above, notable resilience of civil society activism and optimisation of available space; e.g. Myanmar NGOs operating from Thai bases; Cambodian NGOs not

- fully subject to systematic control and repression; new manifestations of Thai civil society structures and their agility, with resulting options for Oxfam/IR partnership.
- Diminished role of International Financial Institutions in the funding of hydro dams and other energy infrastructure, but increased role of Chinese and Thai banks.
- Some subtle changes in Chinese approach to Mekong WRG, while still not a member of the MRC, and setting up its own structures for regional consultation and agreement. As examples, China has engaged in joint studies with the MRC, and the MRC now has observer status with the LMC.
- Emergence of solar and wind power as significant viable non-fossil fuel, non-hydro energy sources in the region; potential for disruption of the hydro agenda, but also the current lack of direct impact on power development and hydro plans recognition that the hydro agenda is driven by other forces besides economic and energy security rationales.
- Greater awareness of climate change has had impact broadly across the region, notably through the low-flow episode in the Mekong in 2019-2020. Governments and others citing climate change as the driver of altered river flows, to distract attention from the impact of hydro dams on the upper stream.

Transboundary and regional partnerships and stakeholders: It appears that the responsiveness and openness of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat to engagement with civil society and to concepts of gender equity has advanced measurably since IP1; but that there are still significant limitations, compounded by the MRC's relative lack of power amongst government and corporate stakeholders who drive energy policy and infrastructure plans. Also, the IP2 consortium seems to have taken full cognisance of the increasing role of China, and of Chinese banks in the Mekong region, including some possibly unexpected positive features of this, noted further below. These have included developments in adoption and issuance of guidelines related to Chinese overseas investment in recent years, including the government's Green Finance Guidelines, which require both state and commercial banks to establish grievance mechanisms for affected communities. These are oversighted by the new National Financial Regulatory Administration. One small but significant sign was the Chinese Embassy in Thailand accepting IR's invitation to participate in the 2023 Mekong Fair, at which their representative spoke publicly.

Private Sector Engagement: The limited level of achievement in this area in IP1 was noted in the final evaluation of that project phase. From the documentation of IP2, it appeared that there have been some specific instances of engagement, with some notable impacts, especially relating to the finance sector as below, although overall less than the original vision. Oxfam and partners appear to have remained very conscious of the role of the private sector and its evolution in the changing country and regional contexts, but this did not seem to have been possible to translate into a clear region-wide stream of action, The data collection process around Outcome 3 particularly did note several important instances of engagement and resulting influence, particularly for Thai and Thailand-based financial institutions and companies engaged in hydroelectric development.

Range of documentation: A particular value of IP2 documentation as provided is the extent of items which go beyond immediate accountability requirements, and the direct feeding of the MEAL framework. This included reports of workshops with communities, partners and others; and documents intended for broader external communication, in both print and video format. This combination allowed for a greater depth of understanding of the whole of project

implementation and particularly strong triangulation of some evaluation data collected in the field.



5. FEATURES OF PROJECT DESIGN

<u>GEDSI focus</u> is articulated in a deeper and more detailed manner, and is reported as having been pursued through the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach. The scope of gender equity work has been expanded to include people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE); there has been initiative taken to pursue partnership with organisations of people with disability (OPD) and to include community members with disability in project activities. This is in line with the articulation of Outcome 1, as a gender-transformative goal, and was one of the most substantial foci of investigation through the evaluation.

The question of <u>young people's inclusion</u>, both as a specific target group, and with youth as a factor in multi-identity/intersectionality is not stated as a specific target, but is strongly reflected in practice across the project, looking at the proportion of young women participating and speaking in major regional events; and the high visibility of young women community leaders, in indigenous and other communities. This reflects the increasing importance of young people's expectations and voice as spelled out in the refreshed PEA.

Model of implementation and reflection in MEAL: From close reading of progress reports, and also of the Indicator Tracking Table there seems to be thorough and consistent monitoring of activities undertaken, participant numbers, and overall consistent disaggregation of participant data. How activities, particularly training, workshops and other consultations, have translated into increased awareness, empowerment and united action, is less clear. Some of the indicators used in tracking, particularly for intermediate outcomes, provide for clear entering of quantitative data, around numbers participating in training, workshops or other events, but these do not necessarily amount to evidence of change achieved. These are explored further below under individual Outcomes. This is not to suggest that awareness and empowerment have not increased as a result of IP2's work, but the linkage of activities to outcomes is not always immediately identifiable through the documentation.

Noted the introduction of <u>outcome harvesting</u> as a MEAL instrument; with the relatively small amount of documentation generated being included in the document review. The Outcome Harvesting reports relating to specific advocacy and influencing activities by IR and partners in Thailand and/or focussing on Thai actors, are particularly clear and valuable in providing a summary of complex combinations of activities and results, and analysis of contributions. This is clearly easier when the focus is on a well-defined and time-limited focus and target. Other Outcome Harvesting records give valuable summary representations of training and activities towards awareness and empowerment at partner and community level; but it is not realistically within their scope to give analysis of a defined final outcome. Further consideration and refinement of the use of this tool could add considerable value to future MEAL, and also help in bridging some of the gaps in linkage between activities and outcomes as noted above

Consortium structure: Noting that IP2 has been undertaken by Oxfam in consortium with International Rivers (IR); and with funding from both DFAT and SDC. From the documentation, it would appear that the consortium approach added significant value, up until the mutual decision of IR and Oxfam that IR should revert to the role of regional partner of Oxfam for the No-Cost Extension period. The evaluation briefly examined the structure and the joint funding arrangement, and particularly the balance of transactional costs and intra-consortium communication, under the headline qualities of Efficiency and Coherence

<u>Mid-Term Review and response</u>: The MTR final report was thoroughly read. Reading did raise questions about the review methodology and basic models, and we note both DFAT's expressed critique of the MTR team failing to consult properly on methodology before proceeding, or to engage with feedback on the first draft report. The assertion of the centrality of 'mental models' was difficult to understand, or what was actually proposed in terms of 'changing mental models' as a means to achieve the high-level Outcomes; also, the 'iceberg' model which was at the centre of the MTR's conceptual framework was difficult to comprehend and integrate.

The MTR's questioning of the achievability of Outcome 3 per ToC was noted, while also acknowledging the relative emphasis to be given to the Theory of Action. Outcome 3 has therefore been the necessary focus of much of the data collection and analysis undertaken for the MTR but less in the light of its ultimate achievability, or what might be changed in the IP approach; and more on the relevance of continued emphasis on gender justice, capacity building and empowerment while changes in the approach and conduct of the most powerful actors continue to appear slight and slow.

The MTR also raised the issue of <u>program coherence</u>, and in particular, the extent of linking up between community-level work in Cambodia with the wider region and with engagement with stakeholders at higher levels. This was a legitimate question to raise, though also reflects back to the detailed project documentation about the widely differing contexts in each of the countries of the region, necessitating different channels and targets of approach – whether, in fact, a distinct ToC for each country is called for. The evaluation has sought to address this issue; how successful the multi-layer and locally differentiated approach taken by IP2 has been in responding to both the diversity and the interconnectedness of the region.

6. INTERROGATING THE THEORY OF CHANGE AND THEORY OF ACTION

The Theory of Change and Theory of Action (Logic Model) have driven and underpinned the design and implementation of IP2, having been initially articulated for the initial project proposal, and revised for the No Cost Extension in 2024, with the findings of the Mid-Term Review having been a significant driver.

It is appropriate to interrogate these both at the outset, and so to set the findings of the evaluation in their context. While the full set of summary Findings are given in section 11 below, some headlines of the evaluation team's assessment are set out here.

It is essential to note first, that the Outcomes per the ToC were set with an eight-year timeframe in view, rather than the four-year implementation period of IP2; secondly, that in the light of implementation experience and the contextual analysis of the refreshed PEA, the wording of Outcome 3 was modified from 'actors at the national and regional levels will increasingly comply with international standards..' to 'will increasingly commit to comply ..', as a more realistic goal.

From review of documentation and engagement with partners, PWWW and stakeholders in the field and online, it can be asserted that IP2 has:

- Successfully fostered women's voice and leadership from community to national level and beyond across the sub-region; and the ability of women to articulate and carry forward issues relating to their own and their families' and communities' rights with regard to governance of water and other natural resources.
- Creatively and flexibly supported many civil society bodies from local to national and regional level to engage with official actors and the broader community around issues of water governance.
- Achieved a greater degree of engagement with government, transboundary actors, and some private sector bodies to open evidence-based dialogue on issues relating to WRM and RE.

Quantitative results relating to these from the IP2 Indicator Tracking Table are given under the respective Outcomes below.

It could be argued that, given the resources available and the constraints present, Oxfam and International Rivers have achieved, directly and via their partners, as great a level of progress as was possible in these areas for international civil society bodies and their allies. More detail is given under each of the Outcomes and OECD-DAC criteria below.

However, the ToC whether as originally articulated or in the revised version presented with the NCE does seem optimistic, and particularly when read in conjunction with both the original and refreshed PEA, and further when viewed in relation to the findings of this evaluation. It is noted that the original ToC was developed prior to the Covid19 pandemic; the military coup in Myanmar and continuing military influence over government in Thailand, as well as the ratcheting-up of controls of civil space in both Vietnam and Cambodia. It is clearly arguable that significantly greater progress towards change at the level of national governments could have been achieved without these. The fact stands, however, that democratic institutions and processes of access and transparency have proven more fragile than the ToC Assumptions

would appear to indicate. At the same time, IP2 implementation has demonstrated their resilience in some areas, and possible green shoots are emerging.

Some key points relating to the modified Assumptions are :

Assumption per design	Commentary
Comprehensive analysis of impact (including social & ecological) of current WRG & energy strategies & other alternatives are able to be presented in monetised terms for policy makers	Access to those within government who actually make and implement policy has remained very limited; although some important breakthroughs have been noted
GMS countries continue to engage in transboundary WRG platforms and processes	Engagement has continued, and is likely to continue to do so, but there is a weak apparent connection between transboundary bodies, especially the MRC and national policy and decision-making
Within GMS governments across the region, influential ministries related to water resources, agriculture, fisheries &/or energy policy are open to alternative analyses in decision-making and influenced by public opinion	Experience in IP2 indicates that some branches of government, or individual officials within them, are increasingly open to new analyses, and that in some countries, public opinion carries some weight, but these are not usually the ministries, or the officials, which carry greatest weight in policy and decision-making, or which control the essential budgets. To date there is relatively little conclusive evidence to suggest major shift in this area; although there have been a couple of notable and possibly unexpected shifts
CSO political space is highly dynamic and opportunities are available in each country & across the region to constructively engage in WRG planning & decision-making processes at sub-national, national &/or regional levels	Space for civil society could still be argued to have been dynamic through the period of IP2; and Oxfam and partners have been demonstrably agile and creative in optimising use of the restricted and shifting space, but as per the refreshed PEA, the prevailing direction has been towards greater restriction

The findings of this evaluation appear to validate numerous elements in the ToC flow, particularly

- Effective women and riverine community leaders, accepted and supported by the public
- Affected communities presenting a compelling case for the cultural, ecological and environmental value of rivers

 Analysis and evidence of the impact of large-scale hydro power and RE alternatives [is developed and presented]

And other elements lower down in the flow, to which Oxfam, IR and partners have had the most direct input and influence.

Regarding intermediate steps, such as

- Linked and coordinated national and regional stakeholder coalitions
- Targeted multi-media messaging and engagement, and
- Market demand (for ecological services, RE alternatives,

there is evidence of significant progress, for which IP2 activity has been a significant contribution; but not yet reaching the critical mass that could trigger change higher up in the flow.

Thus achieving the flow to

National and regional WRG decision-makers balance community, energy and environmental priorities

and other elements at that level seems difficult to attain even in an eight-year timeframe. The factors informing this assessment are explored further under the individual Outcomes below. It does also need to be asserted that activities and achievements under all three Outcomes appear very creditable, overall to have demonstrated a very high degree of effectiveness given the operating context.

Accordingly, several of the boxes in the ToC flow chart are questionable, particularly relating to . The overall strategy, as articulated in the ToA, still seems largely appropriate, but the timeframe and scope of its ultimate full achievement seem may still notfit within an eight-year period.

From conversations with communities, the final projected Impact,

More sustainable livelihoods of riparian communities through access to river resources & the environmental services they provide

also needs to be viewed in the larger economic context, looking beyond issues of water resource governance, including issues of increased population pressure on existing resources; increasing reliance on industrial and service sector employment and different expectations arising from increased education levels.

The Theory of Action

The Theory of Action/Logic Model has more obvious consonance with the pattern of both implementation and achievement, particularly for Outcomes 1 and 2. The Intermediate Outcomes, expected Outputs, and Activities designed to achieve the Outcomes all appear achievable and to match with the actual progress of implementation. This is less consistently the case for Outcome 3.

Regarding the final Outcomes themselves, initial findings of the evaluation are that

 Per Outcome 1, Women and leaders of marginalised social groups <u>are</u> now playing leadership roles in influencing. Engagement so far most obvious at the sub-national level, but with important engagement increasing at national and regional levels. Advances have been made in CSO adoption and use of gender analysis and impact in planning and reporting, and government and private sector actors using Gender Impact Assessment in their planning and strategy, but at a lower rate that targeted.

- Per Outcome 2, Riverine communities and civil society actors (which are inclusive of those communities) are engaging with and influencing policy and planning processes, and definitely promoting the rights and interests of the communities and groups concerned, To date this has been mostly evident at sub-national rather than regional and national levels, but with important national advances in some countries, and increasingly strong regional networking and visibility. Engagement does not consistently translate to observable influence, at least with policy- and decision-makers; but is a necessary condition to achieve influence.
- Given the limits to date of civil society and riverine communities' influence, it follows that per Outcome 3, evidence of state and other actors formally committing to compliance with international standards in hydropower development and renewable energy is so far limited; but also noting some individual early promising signs and examples. .

As this report will explore and detail, the above headline findings do not mean that IR and Oxfam's strategy in practice has been at fault; nor is it a deficiency in 'mental models', but per the final Recommendations, recalculation of feasible timelines and some modification of practice and strategy is indicated if a further phase of Inclusion programming is to be pursued.

7. FINDINGS AGAINST OUTCOMES

7.1. Outcome 1: Inclusion, Gender Equality and Women's Leadership

7.1. 1. Overview

The full wording of the planned Outcome is

Women leaders and representatives of marginalised social groups are playing leadership roles in influencing sub-national, national and regional state and non-state actors in WRG and energy policy and planning processes

Two Intermediate Outcomes are set for reporting, namely

More women, including young and Indigenous women are actively engaging in WRG and RE-related public events, platforms, and forums at local, national, and regional levels

And

Increased use of gender and social analysis among CSOs, private sector and policy makers in WRG and RE development

IP2 appears to have achieved a very high degree of success against the first intermediate outcome, and this has been borne out both through project documentation by Oxfam, IR and partners, and the findings of the independent evaluation through direct engagement with women leaders themselves in KIIs and Focus Group Discussions. The impact of the training and accompaniment provided by the project appears exceptional, as detailed in dedicated reports on the Feminist Participatory Action Research model, and through confirmation in interviews by those who have participated. This has been noted in country locations where access to communities has been relatively open and flexible. This impact has the potential to deliver sustained change from community level upwards. Instrumental in this appears to be a closely integrated approach, which has combined individual face-to-face training with sustained accompaniment and establishment of continuing networks for peer support. From conversations with Oxfam staff; the communique from the Feminist Leadership Retreat and conversations with other international NGOs supporting women's engagement in WRG, this has been structured intentionally, with recognition of women's multiple roles and responsibilities within family and community, and the need to integrate leadership functions with these. The power of peer learning and example also seems to have been particularly potent: women leaders interviewed in the field remarked on the impact of meeting women of comparable circumstances to their own and hearing of the roles they had taken on in advocating for their own and their communities' rights. This was also echoed by representatives of other organisations who had seen the impact on others of women leaders speaking in regional and global gatherings. The model used within IP2 has combined apparently simple elements to achieve a quite unusual degree of change, as is explored further below,

Regarding the second intermediate outcome: documentation records multiple instances of engagement with CSOs, the private sector and policy makers, and very sound practice in doing so. Introduction of the Gender Impact Assessment tool, developed under IP1, has been one important element of this. However, achievement of verifiable change in gender and inclusion practice by government and private sector actors is not as clearly in evidence. For 2022, the target was of 70% of targeted stakeholders using and reporting on gender analysis and impacts

in WRG and RE; with an actual result of 17%. Of a target of three government and private sector stakeholders using Gender Impact Assessment in Environmental or Social Impact Assessment, the annual result was one. There was improvement reported in 2023, with 43% (against a target of 70%) of stakeholders using and reporting on gender analysis and impact, which held for the final aggregate reported for the project in June 2024, and five out of six targeted stakeholders using GIA in their planning and strategy.

This could be seen as a high bar to set. GIA was introduced under IP1, and had an enthusiastic response from some government stakeholders, notably the Lao Women's Union; but as is noted in more detail under experience with Outcome 3, international NGOs and their partners actually have minimal leverage with large private sector actors, and particularly those investing in hydropower infrastructure.

Further, it could be argued that anticipating wide and action-focused uptake of gender analysis and impact assessment by government and private sector within the project timeframe is an ambitious goal. In the focus on raising awareness and skill of gender analysis and principles of inclusion among government actors, it is clear that access has increased, with key examples cited below. All points listed are recorded in project documentation, and were independently cited by partners, and in some cases communities, through interviews in the field assessment.

- Direct input by staff and partners to the Cambodian Ministry of Environment's gender mainstreaming strategy.
- Gender and Development Association conducting GEDSI training for all IP2 partners in Laos
- Engagement of Oxfam staff and women leaders in the women's leadership forum on fisheries; direct input to the revised Sub-Decree on Fisheries.
- The development of the 5-year strategic plan of women leadership network on fisheries that addressed the root causes and barriers and encompassed public representation, decision making and economic empowerment to advance women's leadership in this sector.
- Women in Cambodia, including Indigenous, Khmer and ethnic Lao women engaged through the FPAR process to prepare guidelines for gender-aware guidelines for WRM and mining.
- The key findings from FPAR activity at community level provides an essential foundation for evidence-based policy influencing in water governance.
- Direct capacity building inputs to the Lao Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment's Gender Technical Group
- Use of participatory and gender-inclusive community impact research findings to inform the co-design of further research by the National University of Laos; and integration of gender impact analysis into the four subjects in Faculty of Water Resources curriculum.
- Submission of the research findings to the Nam Ou hydroelectric company. (This was
 courteously received by the Chinese-owned company, who indicated that any requests
 for funding contribution for activities identified would need to be submitted in
 accordance with the company's financial cycle.
- Vietnam partner CSRD's collaboration with the Vietnam Women's Union on research on women's role in Natural Resource Management (NRM); engagement with different technical departments at district and provincial level.
- Input by women community leaders. To the PNPCA for the Don Sahong hydropower station's expansion.

• DRAGON Institute at Can Tho University enabling support to a women's cooperative for circular economy and toxic waste reduction.

It is crucial to consider the differences between individual country contexts in measuring project achievements. In Thailand and Cambodia, there has been far greater activity and resulting measurable success. In some Myanmar locations, despite continuing conflict and military-dominated government, partners and communities have achieved some significant successes. In Laos and Vietnam government control and scrutiny is much closer, restricting the scope for activity and routinely delaying official approvals. Where it has been possible to engage constantly with CSOs over time, many are now poised and ready to push for further and more concrete change. Local partners are offering up analysis and have some important new research and implementation tools, often directly managed by communities. This can be seen as building towards critical mass for more confident engagement and eventual influence. As is further detailed under Outcome 3, the presence of sympathetic streams in government has become more evident, though not in those areas where government agencies are empowered to making the most difference.

Numbers of women assuming public leadership roles are presented in the annual progress reports. These are often based on single events; though the degree of preparation and confidence-building required for women from the grassroots to be present and speak in large public gatherings is not to be underestimated.

From both documentation and evaluation fieldwork, it is clear that significant progress has been made in enabling women's leadership across all countries of the region, but with notable differences between them. This appears to be due to the relative ease or otherwise of introducing training in Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) training. Due to relatively low regulatory barriers, this had the greatest penetration in Cambodia and Thailand. One Myanmar partner successfully implemented this at community level after joining a Training of Trainers course, and conducted research with five women community leaders as coresearchers, further building confidence and capacity of both the leaders and the community as a whole. In Laos, as is noted above, there was no opportunity for the consultant evaluator to engage directly at community level, but documentation and interviews indicate that the Sao Baan ('People of the Village') research model used by partner CLICK had close parallels to FPAR, and comparable impacts. GDA staff received training in FPAR, but have not yet had the opportunity to run training for other organisations or communities to date

7.1. 2. Responses from Cambodian women leaders

The most extensive feedback on the training, the accompanying follow-up support and its results was gathered through interaction with communities and individual women leaders facilitated by partners in Kratie, Stung Treng and Ratanakiri provinces of Cambodia. In some locations, women-only meetings and FGDs were organised; in others, men who had also participated in the training were also present. The broad findings from this community sample were triangulated against individual FPAR project reports.

Almost universally, when women were asked about change in the community, and their role in that, they immediately and emphatically reported major change, and ascribed it to the training they had participated in. There was some variance when an initial question was put about experience of the training itself—in one Kratie community, the first woman said

[&]quot;that was a long time ago, and I've forgotten it all";

in Tropeang Chres community in Ratanakiri, initial hesitant response from the group was

"we remember a bit, but we've forgotten a lot",

followed by emphatic affirmation of the resulting change, as well as specific details of the training recalled and emphasised by others in the groups who had undergone the same training

However, when asked what it was about the training that had allowed the changes to happen, responses in all communities were closely parallel, emphasising validation of their knowledge and their views:

"Now I know that I've got knowledge which is valuable"

"I know that my opinion matters"

"We learned about gender roles and sharing responsibilities in the family" (this from both women and men).

They also emphasised practical skills learned, in research, knowledge of the local environment and fish ecology; around vegetable growing, and possibilities for diversifying their economic activities so they would not need to migrate elsewhere looking for work.

Women in one group said the training had been structured in such a way that it gave a great opportunity for women who are normally tied down with multiple responsibilities with family and livelihood to fully participate. In one island community in Kratie, a woman participant said she had subsequently been elected as village head, which was the first time ever in that commune. She ascribed it to her history of action and engagement in the community, but also changed attitudes and greater receptivity to women assuming public leadership roles.

In one community, women said there had been a decrease in gender-based violence since introduction of the training. In more than one, both women and men reported changes in gender roles in the family, with men taking on household tasks such as cooking and child care, to enable women to engage in meetings.

Constantly surfacing in all communities was the term *klahan* – meaning 'confident', but also 'brave'.

"Before I had no courage/confidence (phiep klahan); now I can speak up and share my opinion and knowledge in public meetings."

"I'm confident/brave now to go and speak directly to the village head/commune chief".

Those who had directly participated in the training talked about how they had gone on to spread the new knowledge and approaches in their own communities. Differing responses were given regarding the extent of uptake; in Sandan (Kratie), one woman in the group said around 60% of the community still stuck with old patterns and ways of doing things – specifically mentioning families involved in gambling, or where men were heavy drinkers – but that others had readily taken up the new approaches.

One young woman in Stung Treng spoke about how she went about disseminating new ideas and approaches – not waiting for people to come to meetings, but approaching groups of people wherever they were gathered – such as men sitting together to drink beer and talk – and engaging them in discussion.

In all locations, women spoke about the importance of supportive relationships, and also of setting an example in their own families and lives:

"If people know your husband is a drunk, they won't listen to you. You have to fix that first if you want people to engage".

7.1.3. Reaction and push-back

In all focus groups and community meetings, the question was put as to whether there had been push-back or reaction from male family members and the wider community, and if so, how they had dealt with it.

Several women reported that their husbands had been completely supportive from the outset. This included both older and younger women; majority Khmer and Indigenous women. Others gave different examples – no-one mentioned violence or the threat of it.

One young woman in Stung Treng said her husband had initially grumbled about the amount of time she was spending away at meetings. She resolved this by getting him to accompany her to several meetings, where he realised that what his wife was engaged with was of practical use to the family and the community, and made no further complaint.

Another young woman said her husband was initially jealous of her involvement in meetings and activities, and resented the fact that she was literate, while he wasn't. Things changed when the husband was (incorrectly) charged with using the tractor he hired out for illegal forest cutting. With guidance from staff at MVi, the CSO partner, she undertook all the complex processes and gathering of documentation to prove that the charges were incorrect and ensure he did not suffer any legal penalty. From that, he appreciated the value of what his wife had learned, and was doing in the community.

One husband fussed when he saw a photo from a training event organised by the partner, seeing a tall young man standing behind his wife. She explained that he was a trainer (staff of the organisation), and he continued to grumble for a while, but gradually came to accept both the value of the training, and his wife's freedom to attend that and other outside activities as required.

One older woman said that she came under criticism from neighbours who came to criticise her for supposedly neglecting her family responsibilities to attend meetings and engage in community activities. She reported that when the neighbours came to scold her, she was engaged in a regular food-preparation task, cutting up fish to be preserved. She did not respond to the criticisms, but just kept on with her work. Eventually, the neighbours fell silent and left, and did not make any further criticism – she said this was because she had demonstrated practically that she could still fulfill all her traditional family role while taking on community leadership. This specific instance could indicate that the community members concerned found her taking on a leadership role acceptable, so long as she continued to shoulder all the 'traditional' gendered workload. The meeting context did not allow time to explore whether she had in fact worked out more equal sharing of domestic tasks with her husband, as was reported by women and men in other community groups interviewed.

Indigenous women reported a range of factors that were particular to their communities. One older woman from the Kuy minority in Stung Treng said that the indigenous cultures were very patriarchal, and there was more resistance – although from her description of her subsequent

activities and community response, it appeared that she had enabled even greater change in gender roles and leadership as was reported in any other community visited.

7.1.4. Experiences and insights of indigenous women leaders

3SPN, the chief Oxfam partner in Ratanakiri province, organised a focus group of young women from different Indigenous communities, who reported similar changes in skill and confidence in both community engagement and practical livelihoods measures as in other groups and communities interviewed. A common view they expressed was that in the past, parents had not been happy to have their daughters go far from the community for education, training or employment. All of them reported that their parents and families were now accepting of the young women's changed roles; their community organising activities, and the fact that they were regularly travelling outside the community. They ascribed this both to direct recognition of the value that their training and activism had delivered, and the greatly changed socio-economic conditions in the area. Shifting cultivation was no longer viable, as Khmer settlers had come and taken up land, and large commercial plantations had replaced forest; fisheries catch was reduced; improved roads had made travel easier, and acquiring new skills was essential to earn income.

The young women were still emphatic about the marginalisation they had experienced in education and employment, and spoke very specifically about the importance of the approach taken by 3SPN, in consistently engaging Khmer, ethnic Lao and Indigenous people on a fully equal footing in all activities – and that this was quite different to social norms in the area.

One other significant indigenous perspective came from Chovy, a young woman participating in the focus group discussion organised by MVi in Stung Treng. Chovy identified herself as coming from Kbal Romeas, a Bunong indigenous community on the Sesan river. Chovy reported that prior to the training, she had been 'just an ordinary housewife', but that in the training, she had learned about gender roles, fish spawning and migration, and conducting research. She ascribed a lot of the change she had helped to engender to having a very supportive husband, and spoke about her new role as a major cultural shift in the village. This was interesting given that Kbal Romeas had been a significant locus of activism and change during IP1, when the community was displaced for the Lower Sesan 2 hydro dam and had successfully organised to protest and reclaim some of their rights. Community members interviewed for the IP1 final evaluation spoke about major change in the community stemming from this, particularly regarding women's leadership and the role of young people. From Chovy's story, it appeared that continuing engagement and inputs were needed to completely embed that change across the community; one major period of activism and organising did not guarantee complete and enduring change.

7.1.5. Partner practice and experience in Vietnam

Penetration of FPAR and other training in Vietnam was less than in Cambodia or Laos, due mainly to the regulatory and approval restrictions on partners. In the two main project initiatives that it was possible for the evaluation consultant to directly engage with, there was clear evidence of progress in women's leadership roles, and wider understanding of the principles and significance of gender equity and inclusion, but coming from a much lower base.

The A Luoi project for water resource management and livelihoods of an indigenous minority community in an upland region of Thua Tien Hue province. The Sekong River, one of the major Mekong tributaries, flows through A Luoi district before crossing Laos and joining the Mekong in

NE Cambodia. The project was negotiated successfully by the partner after considerable delays in official processes, significantly because of the integration of livelihoods with WRM, and therefore aligning closely with official government priorities, for the economic and geographic stabilisation of poor and remote communities.

The project introduced fish raising activities, through the establishment of ponds managed by community groups. In order to ensure the right conditions for fish raising, there was a need for change in practice around disposal of agricultural poisons (previously dumped in waterways) and management of vegetation used for fish feed. The fish raising activity was aimed to provide income for women, while also reducing their dependence on forest foraging for food and marketable products.

The project had explicit targets of providing opportunities for women to undertake leadership roles and to establish greater community awareness of women's capacity; to improve trust, and the voice of women in their families and in the community.

Women participants who engaged in a FGD with the evaluator spoke of achieving greater knowledge and confidence through the project, also of taking on management roles in the groups. It was noted however that in many cases, men had been elected as group heads, with women saying that men

'were more confident, and were better at communicating',

while women took roles as group secretaries or treasurers.

It was noted by the consultant evaluator and the local Women's Union representative that this was the first time a cooperative livelihoods project had been established with a minority community in the province. The project duration of two years was not long enough to assess whether the fish raising initiative would be economically successful (though initial indications were good), or to undertake the level of training and accompaniment which could address established gender norms to a greater degree. However, the training provided by CSRD, the IP2 partner, was targeted to women, who then had the role of passing on knowledge and awareness to their families, and CSRD reported that women self-reported as being more confident in their new economic and management roles. One vision-impaired man was elected as a group head in the community. The local agriculture office and the fisheries sub-department also made a very favourable assessment of the project.

<u>The DRAGON Institute</u> is implementing a project under IP2 for capacity building of young people in the application of renewable energy to farming cultivation in the Mekong Delta, running a series of trainings, seminars and preparation for initiation of student research projects in line with the general strategy of Can Tho University.

IP2 support was critical to this: students in this area are required to undertake a research project of their choosing. As the education system does not provide funding support for research-related costs, most students would normally take up low-cost options, few of which give the opportunity to engage in the field and uncover new and valuable knowledge. IP2 support via DRAGON made funding available to cover the costs of research around issues of climate change, changing water resource patterns and livelihood impacts in the Mekong delta, and integration of gender perspective into the curriculum and research agenda. The project has consistently sought to promote women's participation in these research areas.

From the evaluator's engagement, it appeared that there had been some real successes in a particularly challenging context, and that there was continuing openness to understanding and inclusion of gender perspectives.

The project had been stalled by the long lag in approval time. Approval was initially sought at inception of IP2, but not granted until July 2023 – fully36 months later, Also, DRAGON's targets of 60% participation of women students in the university research program were not achievable, as enrolment was under control of the university. In the end, an estimated 35 – 40% of participants were women, and just two out of eleven research studies undertaken were headed by women.

Despite this, some important initiatives were made: the seminar received a presentation from Ms Lu Thi Nhat Hang, a rural woman who had been struggling to establish a 'circular economy' women's cooperative with other women, recycling agricultural waste products. She had received significant assistance from the provincial Agricultural Extension Centre, but reported that she had not even been aware of the Women's Union, or the support she could be able to tap into from there, as well as other technical supports that could be available. The local branch of the Women's Union had reached out to invite her to the "Women Startups in the Mekong Delta" contest a few months previously. Through this platform, DRAGON realised that her circular economy cooperative model had a meaningful fit with the criteria so invited her to present at the stakeholder meeting they had organised. Through this engagement, she learned that there were further resources she could draw on both through the university and other government technical bodies. This was actively facilitated by DRAGON, in its role not as a donor organisation, but in enabling linkages between rural practitioners in RE and climate change-related fields, and academic and official bodies which are able to provide resourcing and continued support.

The stakeholder meeting also included a presentation from the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) on the barriers to economic improvement faced by women in the Mekong Delta - an indication that gender considerations have come on the radar at that level. The presentation was found to be very directly relevant and in fact moving by Ms Lu Thi Nhat Hang and other participants.

Ms Ngo Thi Tuyet Em, of the Women's Union affiliated Centre for the Development of Women in the Mekong Delta, spoke of her own experience as an environmental engineer who had consistently been rejected for positions matching her technical qualifications, apparently on the grounds that she was a woman. The Centre (not affiliated with IP2) offers assistance with livelihoods and related skills for women survivors of gender-based violence, and Ms Tuyet Em spoke of the challenge for women in understanding their own capability and potential to take on unfamiliar activities.

7.1.6. Broader GEDSI Inclusion: People with Disability; People of diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity or expression (SOGIE)

IP2's GEDSI strategic framework detailed both mainstreaming and targeted approaches to broaden inclusion beyond gender to specifically cover people with disability (PwD) and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE). Inclusion strategies were integrated into IP2 design from the outset, with engagement of one established Thai organisation of people with disability (OPD) in the design, and also consultant input and training on diverse SOGIE inclusion (although the latter was unfortunately not completed).

Project reporting noted that integration of disability inclusion did not progress as well as hoped in all locations. Approaches to one Cambodian Organisation of People with Disability (OPD) had been met with the response that water resource governance was not an area which their members felt was of direct relevance to them, and they declined the offer to partner. More successful partnership with the Lao Disabled People's Association is detailed below.

Some assessment of the degree to which inclusion of both people with disability and people of diverse SOGIE had been achieved at community level was included in direct engagement with communities and community leaders in local community fisheries organisation and water resource management in Cambodia, as well as through interviews with representatives of Lao and Cambodian organisations of people with disability, and one Cambodian organisation of people with diverse SOGIE. . The question was raised in all Cambodian communities visited as to whether and how far people with disability and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity had been included in community activities and leadership. Responses varied – in one Kratie community, a man with a visible disability (leg amputation) was engaged in the meeting, though did not speak. In more than one community, it was stated that measures were taken to ensure that PwD were included in community fisheries meetings and activities, including providing transport to people with mobility restrictions; leading in people with vision impairment, and using sign language to include hearing-impaired people. (it is important to note that all speech-based IP2 communication materials include sign language medium to ensure access for people with hearing impairment). In no case was there a possibility of speaking directly with PwD to hear their experiences and views.

There was a range of responses regarding people of diverse SOGIE. The Khmer language terms used were 'people who love the same sex' or 'third-gender people'. In a couple of instances, the response was that they didn't know of anyone in the community. In one community visited in Stung Treng, the evaluator was told in advance that there would be one person of diverse SOGIE in the meeting, as he regularly participated in activities. He was discreetly pointed out in the meeting, but did not engage substantially, saying that he was not at ease in Khmer language (the community is ethnic Lao), and left the meeting early. There was no chance to explore more thoroughly what his degree of engagement was in community activities where there was no language constraint, so not possible to draw any further conclusion on how intersectionality manifests in this particular circumstance.

Kha Sroh, the Kuy woman elder in Stung Treng, was very emphatic on the need to include people of diverse SOGIE, and spoke of how it had been done. She said that gender non-conforming men (the term 'gay' does not necessarily directly correspond to Cambodian usage and culture) had been very hesitant to be involved, because they were used to being called derogatory names, like *ktoey*, and were embarrassed and ashamed. She said she had overcome this by directly and repeatedly engaging with them, addressing them as 'nephew', and stressing that they were part of the community, that they had a right to speak, and that the community needed their input and their voice. In speaking with the group of young Indigenous women in Ratanakiri, the response voiced by one, to which others appeared to assent, was that 'of course they're included; they're people just like us', and that in engaging them the young women leaders stressed that the work needed everyone in the community to participate, though no further detail or specific examples were given.

<u>Partnerships with Diverse SOGIE organisations:</u> Another route to inclusion of people of diverse SOGIE was through a small grant provided to Men's Health Social Service (MHSS), a Cambodian CSO established primarily for support to people living with HIV and AIDS, and which has a

particular focus on men who have sex with men (MSM) and other gender diverse people. The project was short-term, but as reported by an organisation representative at interview, and also in project documentation, achieved significant success in enabling people of diverse SOGIE to engage in community-wide activities around clean water access, community fisheries, and environmental rehabilitation, where they had previously been excluded. Participants had reported an overall drop in discrimination in the communities concerned, and the project had also given the impetus to set up community focal points to help people of diverse SOGIE obtain government ID cards, which had previously been one aspect of discrimination they had experienced.

The project also provided a small grant to Cam-ASEAN, an informal group advocating for the rights of people with diverse SOGIE. These enabled members to engage in water governance events and raise awareness about their rights. In water and fisheries related events, they used social media and art performances to collectively voice their concerns.

Partnership with Organisations of People with Disability: Two major instances of this were followed up. In Cambodia, a small grant was made to Women in Leadership, Advocacy and Disability (WLAD), which enabled them to engage directly in specific activities around water resource management, including fisheries management and clean water management. Ms Sun Sreytouch, the organisation head of program, reported at interview that this had been revelatory for the organisation's members, as it was the first time that, as women with disabilities, they had been able to participate and have a voice in areas they had previously felt excluded from. Ms Sreytouch also spoke about the value of the training they had received in how to conduct surveys, as part of the package of support from IP2, and this had enabled them to research and present clear figures on the needs of PwD in several communities for the first time. The organisation had not since had any further engagement with IP2, but the experience had given clear evidence of how inclusion of PwD could be advanced with a relatively small level of resourcing. However, this is the entrance toward building organisational capacity of PwD organizations for the long term engagement in the water governance and other related theme to have their voices heard.

The other major example of engagement with PwD was the partnership with the Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA). A representative of the organisation was interviewed by the team consultant and gave the following reflections:

- Through the project, the LDPA staff had the opportunity to learn more about the livelihoods of PwD in riverine communities, and reported that they themselves had found out that rural PwD 'could do more than they [the staff] had previously thought'.
- Increased knowledge of GEDSI analysis, coaching and influencing skills was a major benefit of the project; it had been good to see that at least one or two PwD were included in each training session, and that training venues had been chosen with a view to easier access.
- They found that the Gender Development Association had started to expand its practice to be inclusive of PwD, and invited LDPA staff to co-design interventions with them.

Continuing challenges and needs reported were:

- Widespread lack of awareness of PwD needs, capability and possibilities for inclusion and contribution.
- Current lack of role models of PwD included and active in WRM and other community activities.

- Lack of systematic inclusion in IP2 events there were no PwD enabled to participate in the National Dialogues, for instance. LDPA staff and other PwD still feel self-conscious in meetings, and just want to be considered and treated like everyone else.
- GDA had been welcoming, but omitted basic measures, such as providing sign interpreting in meetings.
- Understanding of intersectionality has so far been neglected, particularly the needs of women with disability.
- As one target, the program needs to ensure that village leadership does not make any decisions on behalf of PwD without consultation, rather than working from their own judgement and assumptions
- There is an apparent lack of consensus and different levels of understanding va regarding the meaningful inclusion of PwD, and that it is not solely the role of LDPA

LDPA staff also said they had had no chance to participate in the design of IP2. This was confirmed by Oxfam staff, who underlined that at the time of design, LDPA was not known to them, but did note that, as mentioned above, a Thailand-based regional OPD participated in the initial IP2 design workshop.

When Oxfam sent the invitation to participants for the Asia Women and Rivers Congress, questions on specific needs to ensure meaning inclusion in the Congress were asked. For instance, languages and translation, Indigenous practices, Disability specific needs, food and dietary needs. Based on the identified needs, the organising team works on putting in place measures or mechanisms toaddressing those needs.

Ms Huyen Do from Hanoi Association of People with Disabilities (DP Hanoi) was invited to the Congress as a resource speaker. Huyen identified herself as Woman with Disability and she requested specific access to the hotel room with restroom and bathroom that enabled access and shower for wheel-chair users. The Congress logistics team made this specific request to the hotel management; and went to inspect the room a day before the arrival of Ms Huyen to verify. This was all in good and Ms Huyen was happy for her stay during the congress. Disability Inclusion in practice simply means asking the persons what they need and discuss how this need could be met by the provider. In this case, no extra charge was needed as the hotel already has such rooms available.

7.1.6. Gender and power dynamics observed

Some broad observations of process and dynamics in the riverine communities visited and FGDs in provincial capitals were noted. These are limited in number and anecdotal only, so cannot be taken as indicating a broad pattern across IP2. They are cited here as instances of changes possibly attributable to the project approach, and particularly the feminist approach to leadership which is further articulated below:

- Senior leadership of partner organisations is predominantly male, which is arguably removes opportunities for women at community level to have appropriate role models in leadership. In most partner situations observed, male leaders appeared to be enabling of women reporting to them in both office and field situations; and would make formal introductions at the beginning of meetings but then make minimal or no interventions in the process, or in one case, absent themselves completely from the room.
- At the 3SPN FGD with young Indigenous women, two participants had brought young children with them, with one small child being breastfed at intervals through the meeting,

- and another older child clearly familiar with the office and staff keeping happily occupied and entertained through the morning, with the appearance that this integration of parental responsibilities into the work settings was the norm.
- Where village meetings included both women and men, in most cases, women significantly outnumbered men, and men did not appear to be trying to dominate the discourse. This was most obviously the case when participating men had joined earlier FPAR trainings Women were not interrupted; men took up no more of the air time than was proportional to their numbers. In one instance, a woman interjected 'listen to the man!' at a point when one of the men participating had tried several times quietly to raise a point, but had been cut across by other (women) participants.
- CSRD implemented a GEDSI strategy through implementation of the project in Thua Tien Hue.

7.1.7. Pursuing Women's Leadership in Myanmar

Despite the conflict ensuing since the 2021 coup, significant achievements appear to have been made by Oxfam in Myanmar and its partners. Due to logistical obstacles, information for the evaluation was gathered only through online interviews, with OiM staff and representatives of two partners, KESAN and Save the Salween Network (SSN). Application of FPAR was possible only for one partner, KTHM, which operates in an area of Shan state which is conflict affected, and under mixed central government-opposition control, but sufficiently stable to allow some project activities. Ten women from five villages were enabled to join in FPAR training, and on a model similar to that pursued in other countries, took this back to their own villages, where they pursued the development of village profiles, which served as the basis for dialogue with local authorities and the development of action plans. Oxfam in Myanmar staff reported that participants in FPAR and other community members affected had reported similar experiences to those stated by Cambodian informants: that they felt validation of their own knowledge and voice; that other women in their communities were inspired by their experience as they reported it, and were keen to participate in the processes they initiated in the community; that women's leaders' voices were respected in the community in a way that they had not been before – noting that fostering women's leadership was a quite new departure in the target area, with little groundwork in gender equity from previous project interventions. The Oxfam staff's view was that the training and resulting activities gained credibility because they offered concrete benefits to the community. These assessments by Oxfam staff closely matched with the specific previous report on implementation and outcomes of FPAR training in a community in Myanmar.

Undertaking FPAR training was not feasible for KESAN, as the project areas are in a contested zone, subject to conflict and air raids. KESAN has had to remove its office from the immediate project area, and provides support remotely. KESAN staff were interviewed online by the evaluator. They said that, despite the impossibility of providing direct training or other engagement, development of women's leadership in WRM and related areas had continued. The same goal remains in place for KESAN and other civil society partners, to retain and strengthen community control over—fisheries and other resources in the Daw Lar Lake. KESAN had promoted women's leadership in WRM through IP1, and—stated that the momentum had continued in IP2. The conflict situation had in fact accelerated women's taking up of community leadership roles, as many men had either joined different armed forces; had migrated out to avoid conscription, or were keeping as low a public profile as possible, so a larger burden of management fell to women.

Oxfam in Myanmar staff also emphasised the crucial role of peer support between women leaders in Myanmar. The stresses and effects of conflict are felt even outside the contested zones, with price inflation, increased military presence and pressure, and much else. For women to continue to undertake leadership functions as well as their existing multiple responsibilities, debriefing with peers had proved essential. For the remaining NCE period, Oxfam is planning to set up a structured peer counselling service, accessible to women experiencing high stress. The initiative will also facilitate a safe virtual space for women to offer and receive peer support, and enable joint actions to respond to their shared concerns. This will be accessible through different channels to women in Myanmar and also Cambodia.

7.1.11. Women's Leadership Network in Fisheries: Cambodia

This has been established linking up women involved in community fisheries organisations in the three main fishing areas of coastal Cambodia, the Tonle Sap Lake, and the Mekong. Mrs Kha Sros, an older Kuy Indigenous woman mentioned above S joined in the meeting at MVi , and spoke afterwards about her engagement in the Network.

She said she had initially joined in several WLN sessions at the suggestion of one of the MVi trainers, then gradually undertook a lot of work on a voluntary basis, out of solidarity. Drawing on the strength and back-up she drew from the network, she often had very frank words with commune authorities. She had participated in a lot of activities and got lots of experience.

She has joined workshops at village, commune, province and now national level.

When asked about the usefulness of the national workshops, she responded that they were very useful, and allowed women to do more and further, and to share their experiences.

'The network allows us to do better. What we hear from others helps us to fill in the gaps of needs in our own communities.'

'Contact and relationships are the absolute foundation. They allow us to help each other out. We can contact each other directly in between meetings, either using our own means, or else through the NGO partner'

(NB Ms Kha Sros cannot read or write; though speaks both Kuy and Khmer fluently).

"Last night I was afraid, would I be able to speak, and to get it all out. Now I have shared everything that is in my heart"

7.1.12 Regional and Global Engagement by Women Leaders.

IP2 significantly progressed engagement at regional and global level for women leaders in WRG from the Mekong, with particularly strong increases in profile, opportunity and effect for Indigenous women. This is detailed through the IP2 Annual Reports and in specific project reports from key partners – the Asian Indigenous People's Pact and IWRAW. The evaluation team spoke with staff of both organisations, and the evaluation team and also with both community leaders and Oxfam staff who had participated in the Asia Women and Rivers Congress in June 2024.

This gave clear evidence of substantial engagement, voice and networking by women community leaders at levels and in fora that were previously not accessible, and the further building of capacity, confidence, and mutual support which all partners and participants saw as essential for continuation.

In tandem with these, IP2 has enabled women leaders' direct engagement with regional targets for influence, particularly through participation the Mekong River Commission Regional Stakeholder Forum, where there was previously little engagement or voice for women community leaders, and particularly Indigenous women.

AIPP work supported by IP2 included organising of the annual Mekong Indigenous Women's Exchange, to facilitate engagement, capacity building and peer support; direct support to Indigenous women in advocacy spaces, and provision of small grants to Indigenous women's networks to build capacity. AIPP staff stressed the importance of building women's knowledge base, to enable them to speak with greater confidence and impact. Progressive capacity building and facilitation has meant that Indigenous women leaders have now spoken at global gatherings, including successive International World Water Week. This had led to changed perceptions of other actors in the sector – AIPP staff said that previously, Indigenous women were discounted and/or excluded, as not having anything of value to contribute; whereas now they are highly sought after to speak at conferences and gatherings. Also, the importance of making and holding safe space for women as a condition for successful capacity building and greater voice was underlined, as by several other partner and staff representatives interviewed in relation to women's leadership.

IP2 facilitated the participation of eight Cambodian women leaders at the June 2024 Women and Rivers Congress in Chiang Rai, along with Oxfam and IR staff. In the FGD organised by CEPA in Stung Treng, Ms Ream Sreyrath, a young woman leader from Kaoh Khadin in Stung Treng, joined in the FGD at CEPA, and gave this feedback on her participation and its impact:

Women from 18 countries in Asia were present. They discussed women's role in protecting rivers and WRG generally. The participants went down to village level to meet women directly affected by the hydro dam nearby (built several years earlier), and the local women talked about the impacts and how they could protect their village.

Ms Sreyrath was asked if there were lessons from this that could be transferred to Cambodia.

Her response was that the women they visited in the Thai village were a very long-established group. The key elements in their success were

- Working strongly together
- 'Protect the water, and you will have water'
- 'Protect the rice, and you will have rice'.

Sreyrath affirmed strongly that these were lessons that were readily transferable to her own community and to Cambodia generally:

'If we just leave it to men to talk to men – i.e. from community to company and government – then it can easily lead to confrontation. Women are more solution-focused.'

This last observation was made independently in more than one other village meeting during the Cambodian field work.

AIPP staff interviewed also affirmed the knock-on effects of Indigenous women leaders' visibility in international fora; their presence and voice changes perceptions of what is possible, both for other actors present, and also for members of the Indigenous women's own communities and networks, leading to further openings for engagement.

The effectiveness of IP2 initiatives to support Indigenous and other community women leaders in regional and global events was strongly endorsed by representatives of other bodies who were present at the Women and Rivers Congress and at World Water Week. One staff of Simavi, a Netherlands-based organisation which promotes women's rights to water and sanitation reported on how she was inspired by the presentations of Mekong women leaders at the Women and Rivers Congress, and how their activism gave her a stronger sense of what could be achievable by women organising in other contexts.

Shreya Gyawali from Australia Water Partnerships reflected on what she had experienced both at World Water Week and at the Women and Rivers Congress; that the presence and voice of Indigenous women leaders had been new and significant, and had linked to AWP's enabling linkages with Australian Indigenous women activities. Shreya spoke very positively about the connections that the Women and Rivers Congress made possible; noting that there was excellent networking taking place, but not so far leading to direct influence on governments. She noted that previously, women's organisation and advocacy in water resource management had largely been focused on WASH. The focus on broader water resource governance and rights at the WRC opened up new networks and possibilities for linkages.

7.1.13. Assessment: reasons for success of IP2's development of women's leadership

Responses from women who have engaged in IP2 leadership training have been striking, to the point of startling, in terms of their readiness to assert emphatically the change that it has brought about in terms of their own capacity and confidence; their ability to speak out and engage; the validation of their existing knowledge and roles; and the impacts they were seeing on the community and beyond. This appeared to be well outside the range of other gender trainings or capacity building programs that the evaluators had experienced.

The key elements enabling this impact appeared to be:

- Consistent pursuit of an explicitly feminist approach to leadership
- Holding safe space for women leaders only, linked to ongoing accompaniment
- Validation and recognition of women's existing knowledge
- Recognition of the complexity of women's existing multiple roles and responsibilities in family and community
- Training within women's own cultural context, or situations closely comparable some Cambodian indigenous women leaders spoke about the importance of having had indigenous women as trainers.
- Recognition of women's need for peer networking and ongoing support one benefit of the training reported in several communities was that 'women now talk to each other much more', implicitly to share knowledge and address issues.
- Accompaniment has gone beyond provision of training and safe space to ensure that women leaders are confident, feel safe to speak and have access to the information needed to make informed decisions.

• Linked to this, the establishment of ongoing structures for support, including the Women's Leadership Network in Fisheries, and the system being established in Myanmar; created in a way which is accessible and meaningful to women who may have limited formal literacy and are often without internet access.

The above points were gathered through interviews and FGDs at community level and with partners, and are also closely reflected in the communique from the tate Feminist Leadership Retreat, and also supported by the 2024 Women's Leadership Report, in which respondents rated their degree of increasing self-confidence; support and training received, and other related factors.

It was also affirmed by several internal and external stakeholders that the project's consistent long-term demonstration of and support to women in leadership roles has been an important factor in building other women's confidence in their own capacity and potential.

 Trustful relationship and ownership building through FPAR process and increasingawareness of the social and environmental risks of the upstream development projects and climate change have led to increased confident leadership and collective actions among those women leaders

7.1.14. Summary of Findings per Outcome 1:

- IP2 has achieved a high degree of success against this Outcome overall, with
 particularly strong results against interim outcome 1.1, with women and members of
 marginalised groups taking leadership roles and engaging with power holders around
 issues of WRG
- Against Outcome 1.2 Increased use of gender and social analysis among CSOs, private
 sector and policy makers in WRG and RE development results have been more limited,
 but with some significant successes including further uptake of Gender Impact
 Assessment by several government and private sector bodies; direct input to the revised
 national sub-decree on fisheries in Cambodia; integration of GEDSI into curriculum at
 the National University of Laos; and further uptake of Gender Impact Analysis by
 several government and private sector actors.
- Findings from both field assessment and documentation showed a particularly high rate
 of impact in fostering women's leadership and voice in Cambodia and Myanmar, and
 very notably
- Indications from field research show that there has been some negative reaction and pushback against women's greater empowerment and voice, but also that women have been successfully countering this.
- Development of the Women's Leadership Network in Fisheries in Cambodia has been a significant step towards women's leadership and collective voice, demonstrating the effectiveness of networking to support ongoing women's leadership, and providing a base for concerted influencing of relevant policy-makers in the areas of fisheries and WRM more broadly

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- In Vietnam, success in this area has so far been more limited, but significant in those areas and communities where it was possible to target, noting the very entrenched patriarchal norms and structures in targeted communities.
- Indigenous women reported achieving important changes within what they described as particularly patriarchal norms, although significant work still remains to be done.
- The profile and voice of women leaders at national and regional levels has been visibly raised at national and regional levels as a direct result of IP2 intervention. Engagement in regional networks and events by community-level and other women leaders has also created or strengthened platforms for engagement and potential influence at a level not previously feasible for most women leaders from the community level.
- Under IP2 an integrated process for the development and support of women leaders
 has been built, integrating specific feminist training; recognition of women's multiple
 roles and burdens; ensuring peer support; building of networks from sub-national to
 regional level, and ensuring safe space and continuing support and accompaniment,
 and successful advancement of women's leadership at multiple levels is largely due to
 this.
- Integration of disability inclusion has been very uneven across IP2, and there has not been a clear unified strategy. There has been significant success in partnering with the Lao Disabled People's Association and change achieved through their engagement with IP2 partners and with communities; individual Community Fisheries Groups have shown strong practice in meaningful inclusion of People with Disability, and one small-grant partnership with an organisation of women with disability in Cambodia achieved very strong results. These examples could provide the basis for a coherent project-wide strategy going forward.
- Inclusion of people of diverse SOGIE has also been uneven across the project, though
 with two very successful small-grant partnerships demonstrating new strategies for
 inclusion in WRM, and several individual communities and organisations showing
 strong practice in active inclusion. As with disability inclusion, these could form the
 basis for a clearer project-wide strategy in the future.
- A significant number of partners and other actors have now incorporated gender analysis and impact into their planning and reporting, but at lower rates than anticipated. Further government and private sector uptake of Gender Impact Analysis, following successes under IP1, has been more limited than hoped.

7.2. OUTCOME 2: Riverine communities and civil society actors are engaging with and influencing sub-national, national and regional WRG policy and planning processes, and promoting the interests and rights of vulnerable social groups.

7.2.1. Overview

From the project documentation and data collected during the evaluation process, it is indisputable that civil society actors have been supported by IP2 to <u>engage</u> with national and regional planning processes; and demonstrably promoting the interests of vulnerable social groups, including people with disability (PwD), people of diverse SOGIE, and indigenous

communities. How far this has resulted in the <u>influencing</u> of national and regional WRG policy and planning is less clear. The case can be made that through IP2, Oxfam and IR have very ably identified the accessible points of engagement according to each specific national context in the region, and have facilitated and supported CSO partner access. The issue of how far this has resulted in actual change in policy or practice is dealt with in more depth and detail under Outcome 3.

Impacts of the larger political changes and restrictions on civil society space during implementation have been a significant factor. The project design included strong focus on the roles of several national and regional river networks which were stronger and more active at the time of inception. Most of these, including the Vietnam Rivers Network; the Save the Mekong Coalition; Rivers Coalition of Cambodia and the Save the Salween Network, became considerably less active in the early stages of IP2, mainly due to strong external pressures, including both increasing government restrictions, and the weakening of direct network connections that were one effect of the Covid pandemic. This considerably affected the viability of the project strategy, diminishing a key link between local, national and regional action and impact. There were some notable exceptions, particularly with relatively well-established Thailand-based networks, including Fair Finance Thailand, ETO-Watch Coalition and the Thai Consumer Council, progressing its campaign on fair electricity prices.

The impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic over the first 18 – 24 months of the implementation period were also severe, in drastically reducing the opportunities for any in-person gatherings of networks and coalitions. CSOs and community leaders showed remarkable resilience and adaptation to pandemic circumstances, particularly in innovative use of social media and distance communication, but the importance of face-to-face interaction in forging common understanding and strategy among widely disparate actors cannot be overstated.

Engagement by riverine communities themselves has largely been indirect. Where community representatives interviewed gave instances of engagement, it was focused on local and up to provincial level. Most engagement and influence to national level has been via CSOs; although it is also important to note the opening of new platforms, most obviously the national Women's Leadership Network on fisheries in Cambodia, which give a direct voice for local women leaders to national level. As noted under Outcome 1 above, support to local-level women leaders to participate in events such as the Asia Women and Rivers Congress and World Water Week has opened up new opportunities for direct engagement. Instances were given where direct exposure of policy makers to issues at community level has been a crucial element of engagement and influence. This has been the case particularly in Laos, cited by CLICK. There is a dynamic tension between provincial and national levels of government, and if villagers can be heard at provincial level, getting government to connect and act on their voice, the effects can flow upwards. When local communities have succeeded in taking their issue to the Provincial People's Parliament, it has sometimes resulted in prompting debate at national level.

There has been some significant difference in Thailand, with numerous instances of direct community engagement with national actors including the National Human Rights Council, different parliamentary committees, the Ombudsman office, some Thai banks, and individual Members of Parliament. Several civil society-led forums which had high numbers of community participants also invited representatives from government bodies, creating avenues for direct community engagement.

The phrasing of the Outcome also raises the question of the role of current <u>regional</u> planning and policy processes. On the evidence of the PEA, and conversations with different regional and national stakeholders, regional policy and planning processes currently carry relatively little weight in comparison to national ones. This does not subtract from the importance of engagement with regional actors and processes, or the demonstrable and significant success of IR and Oxfam in engaging with these; but does require further examination of what the balance of focus between national, regional and global approaches needs to be in future influencing.

Intermediate outcomes: Three of these are set out in the Annual Progress Reports:

- Communities and CSOs are more informed, and networks are strengthened to influence.
 The indicators used to measure this are CSO partners' knowledge of WRG and RE issues;
 skills in influencing, and membership in networks. Against each of these, a high aggregate success rate is scored to June 2024, measured principally from the Partner Capacity Assessment (PCA).
- Communities and CSOs are engaging with and influencing institutions, government and the private sector on WRG and Renewable Energy (RE) policies. Indicator used for this is evidence of engagement and influence gathered through the PCA, and a high score is given for CSO partners reviewed
- CSO partners are more inclusive of women, people with disability, youth and indigenous
 people, and better able to promote the issues affecting them in WRG and RE
 development. Indicators measuring this are capacity to promote gender and women's
 leadership; and training and dialogue events designed and tailored with GEDSI
 considerations.

On both the documentary evidence from the Annual Reports; PCA, and Indicator Tracking Table as above, and information gathered during the evaluation, IP2 has achieved significant success with the first and third of these; for the second, the issue highlighted above stands: that influence has so far not necessarily followed from engagement – although the latter has been successfully pursued and is the essential precursor to influencing

7. 2. 2. Differentiation across countries and regional bodies

Broadly, the patterns of support and enabling of civil society and community access and voice have corresponded with the particularities of available space in each country:

- In <u>Thailand</u>, considerable open space for direct advocacy and civil society organisation persists, despite the extent of military control and the increase in restrictions on space for organisation and voice. Thai partners of IR and Oxfam have been able to engage in direct advocacy, including joint partner collaboration on the proposed diversion of the <u>Yuam</u> river, supporting affected communities to prepare the People's EIA to contest the flawed official document; direct engagement with the national government and parliamentary committees, advocacy to banks engaged in funding of hydroelectric dam projects, via Fair Finance Thailand (FFT). There has been direct engagement with the Thai National Human Rights Commission in investigating transboundary impacts of the Pak Beng dam planned to be built across the Mekong mainstream in Oudomxay province of northern Laos, and for which Thailand would be the essential customer for electricity.
- Substantial civil society space remains open in <u>Cambodia</u> despite the emergence of a de facto one-party state and tightening controls on the media and activism. The boundaries

to public advocacy were made starkly clear during the course of the evaluation when the spokesperson for one former IP2 partner was arrested for publicly criticising the joint Cambodian-Lao-Vietnamese governments' revived plan for a 'growth triangle' in their shared border area. IP2 partners have made thorough use of available space most obviously through the strengthening of community fisheries groups and their national level networks – both through formally constituted umbrella groups, and the Women's Leadership Network. Creative use of social media has also been made, as well as the stand-out role of Women's Voice Radio.

- In Myanmar, direct influencing of national government is off the table both due to military control, and the uncertainty of the form that future government will take. Within this, it is significant to note that IP2 partner KESAN has close relations with the Karen National Union, which has a status between de facto government/government in waiting in Karen state, or Kawthoolei as it is termed by the KNU, and has achieved strong support for its strategy to preserve the environment of the Daw Lar lake and community management of its resources.
- Civil society and advocacy space has been most obviously and seriously restricted in Laos and Vietnam. At community level, the principal forms of influencing have been the development of locally driven models of WRM which are compatible with government policy, and focus on development of evidence-based solutions, through community and academic research. Use of social media space has remained a channel for some dialogue, though apparently at a more cautious level than in Thailand or Cambodia, and in some cases, postings by government members have been a useful indicator as to the 'acceptable' bounds of discourse.

A very notable development during the lifetime of IP2 has been the opening up of influencing space with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat, and concomitant access to dialogue of the National Mekong Committees, especially in Cambodia. This appears to have been both a result of, and opening for, civil society engagement.

There are common threads to mobilising and influencing strategies used across the region. Key examples identified through documentation review and field data collection are:

7. 2. 3. Networks: Development and Support

This has been most clearly exemplified in ongoing support to the Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT) in Cambodia, and through them to the established fisheries networks across the country. Those include NGO Coalition on Fisheries, the umbrella body which engages directly with government; the Coalition of Cambodia Fishers, which is a platform supporting community groups' internal capacity and sharing of experience and tactics; and the Community Fisheries Network, which brings the two Coalitions together with representatives of the Ministries of the Interior, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and Land Management for periodic meetings and an annual national forum. Meetings are convened to address issues of community fisheries groups on the ground, including combatting illegal fishing activity and the establishment and maintaining of conservation areas. Community fisheries organisation enjoys a high degree of government policy approval. Mr Ek Chamroeun, Network Coordinator of FACT, spoke about how the network has been a vehicle for increased engagement by women in fisheries management:

Women are now confident to speak up in workshops at all levels. They can understand the full context, and communicate this to the authorities. This has been an important contribution from the program. It helps women with their plan to develop the family and community, and participate

in the commune investment program. A lot of women contributed to the national policy, also to inundated forest protection measures around the Tonle Sap Lake. Women understand the whole context.

Mr Ek Chamroeun also noted the proliferation of social media networks among local fisheries cooperatives, for which the initial impetus came under Covid-19 restrictions on movement, but which have resulted in a high degree of ongoing communication and collaboration. He also spoke of the importance of getting the Ministry of the Interior to support commune councils making budget allocation for fisheries groups activities - sustainability is a major issue, addressed below.

Ms Thach Phanady, of the Deputy Director of Fisheries Affairs Department, Fisheries Administration, also spoke of the importance of local fisheries organisation and of the national networks. She spoke very positively of IP2-supported fisheries workshops she had attended, and the increasingly strong and vocal role of women in fisheries management - enabled through the Women's Leadership Network in Fisheries, detailed below. She reported that FiA is developing its own activities to support women's leadership in fisheries, as part of implementing its second five-year Action Plan for Gender Equality Promotion and Child Labour Elimination in the Fisheries Sector 2022-2026. No direct link to IP2 was mentioned in these; but consistent gender advocacy by Oxfam, its partners and other international and local NGOs was implied as being an important impetus. Oxfam staff confirmed that IP2 is supporting the Fisheries Administration in the Action Plan, which has the specific target of increasing women's leadership in community fisheries organisation to a minimum of 30% by 2026.

Against this high level of official support, the relative dearth of actual government resourcing has to be noted. The Fisheries Administration 2023 study <u>Assessment of the Effectiveness of Community Fisheries in Cambodia</u> reported that 39% of those groups surveyed were assessed as 'strong' in their performance, an improvement on the 2018 figure of 9%; and noted the importance of capacity building. The report also did note the importance of sourcing continued funding for community fisheries groups operations, suggesting charging of fees for non-group members fishing in their waters; member subscriptions and tourism initiatives. Other anecdotal sources suggested that a large proportion of the strongly-functioning fisheries groups are receiving funding from local or international NGOs. Some groups have received small grants from their local commune councils – these funds have come from an EU grant.

The creation of the Women's Leadership Network in fisheries with more than 400 members and hosted by CEPA is noted under Outcome 1 above, and its essential role is offering peer support to women leaders .With WLN, the use of digital media and communication channels has been highlighted, allowing peer contact across the country, and starting connection with regional network in Thailand and Lao through Oxfam virtually convened meeting. Oxfam staff asserted that WLN is more consistently active in peer support and direct engagement with government than the two longer-established Coalitions.

Regional networking has not been established on as formal a basis as the above; but community and CSO leaders who had participated in regional events spoke of these as a major source of motivation and strength. The impacts of the Asia Women and Rivers Congress on participants are noted under Outcome 1, as is the ongoing IP2-funded work of the Asian Indigenous People's Pact. Despite barriers of language, and the widely differing social and political circumstances of the different countries of the region, participants appear to have immediately latched onto commonalities of experience and circumstance. The global Women and Rivers Network, which

was established with IR support in 2019, convened the Congress, and is intended as an ongoing platform for engagement by women leaders of riverine communities. IR and Oxfam have been key supporters; the experience of the June Congress in expanding the voice, motivation and connection of women leaders indicates the potential of the Network as a channel for influence if it can be supported to maintain activities beyond organisation of the periodic congresses.

7. 2. 4. Development of an evidence base

The need to be able to offer evidence for the need for policy and practice change was a constant theme emerging through the data collection process, and was in all cases raised by respondents, without specific questioning by the evaluation team.

The practice combines three key purposes:

- The offering of 'hard' scientific or economic data and analysis is an acceptable way of approaching government bodies, including policy makers, when any form of direct criticism of policy is unacceptable.
- The process of gathering and presenting evidence is directly empowering to communities, and particularly to women and marginalised individuals within them.
- In a rapidly changing context, influenced by climate change, population movement and other factors in addition to hydro dam development, there are large gaps in available knowledge.

7.2.5. Impact of Community Action Research methodologies

The introduction of Feminist Participatory Action Research detailed under Outcome 1 above has been an important mobiliser and empowering agent in communities in Myanmar and Cambodia. It has been complemented through IP2 implementation with closely related community action research (CAR) methodologies, including the Tai Baan approach which originated with community organisation around dam impacts in Thailand, and was used by IP2 partners and communities there; the Sao Baan approach in Laos, which IP2 partner CLICK adapted from Tai Baan for use in the Lao context, and the development of the People's EIA on the proposed Yuam River diversion mentioned above. It is important to recognise the commonality between these, in that they aim to empower communities and individuals; assert the validity of their knowledge and their ownership of research results.

KTHM Foundation, the IP2 partner in southern Shan state, found that applying FPAR methodology mobilised women and others previously excluded from village-level decision-making processes to gather and analyse evidence which formed the basis for community-level cooperative action plans. In the context where IP2's goals in Myanmar have been recalibrated to ensure resilience of civil society space and functioning, this has not translated as yet into influencing sub-national government, but has left the communities in a stronger position to articulate needs around resource management. Also, Oxfam in Myanmar staff reported that engaging in this and related processes had strengthened KTHM Foundation's profile and functioning in the Save the Salween CSO network.

The community of Koh Snenh, a Mekong island community in Stung Treng province of Cambodia undertook an FPAR study on the impacts of river flow and other changes on the flooded forest, which is an important resource for the community's livelihood. Clear evidence was produced in the published report on the impacts on the ecosystem of altered river flow due to climate change and upstream hydro dam construction, and the resulting effects on livelihoods and labour burden, particularly for women and the elderly in the community. Since the original FPAR

exercise was undertaken, specific research tools have been kept in constant use, particularly the meter for measurement of river depth, which is checked with data recorded three times daily. Community experience of this was confirmed in the group discussion held as part of the evaluation. Results of the particular study were also presented and discussed at the Regional Exchange and Learning on Community Action Research in October 2023. Oxfam staff report that since that exchange, steps have been taken to facilitate further cross-boundary exchange and learning on fisheries between communities.

In talking with the community in Tropeang Chres, Ratanakiri province of Cambodia, the practice of research surfaced spontaneously, when talking about preservation of local natural resources. When discussing the need to preserve natural cover on a nearby island in the Sreh Pok river, one man mentioned that the vegetation included a large number of medicinal plants, and it was important that the community undertake a detailed study of these, to present as evidence for its preservation.

As mentioned above, the Sao Baan (People of the Village) community action research model had adapted for use in Laos by CLICK, the Lao social enterprise partner of both IP1 and IP2, prior to commencement of IP2. In an interview with the evaluator, CLICK staff spoke of the impacts of Sao Baan research in villages in Northern Laos (Pak Ou district). They said that when villagers had gathered and recorded clear evidence, it was much easier for them to approach district authorities and obtain necessary official support. It also built a stronger relationship between villagers and local authorities. The partner stated that that the relationship with authorities outside the village was still far from satisfactory, with instances of government personnel coming to villages supposedly to learn from their research and experience, and taking village agricultural and livestock produce without payment – though it is also noted that this has been a common, or even expected practice where government staff are very low paid and so look to gain in-kind benefits from official visits.

The people's EIA conducted with IP2 support as part of the campaign to halt the Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project in Thailand is one clear example of the use of Community Action Research to strengthen community capacity and voice as part of a larger advocacy and influencing campaign. This was documented in detail as part of an IP2 Outcome Harvesting study. The People's EIA was conducted by people from two affected villages, with support from Chiang Mai University, and presented thoroughly researched data on expected impacts, in contrast to the official EIA, which was seen as deeply flawed. This process was complemented by a lawsuit filed in October 2023; continued capacity building of local communities and networks; sustained media work by IR; and preparation of detailed critique of likely environmental and social impacts by Dr Sitang Pilalar of Kasetsat University, subsequently appointed as an advisor to the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives.

The result of this integrated campaign has been agreement by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to set up three working groups to review the original EIA and anticipated environmental and social impacts; engineering needs; and economic feasibility of the proposed projects. At time of submission of this evaluation, the working groups have not yet been activated, but work on the project has been suspended, and there have been recent signs that the working groups may soon be activated.

7. 2. 6. Academic channels of influence

The DRAGON Institute, one of IP2's Vietnam partners, also the Research Institute for Climate Change of Can Tho University, has focused on student research on impacts of climate change, saltwater intrusion, and introduction of renewable energy in the Mekong delta. Experience in IP1 demonstrated that collaboration with academic research institutions was one of the most acceptable as well as effective channels to influencing government. DRAGON's particular position has allowed it to collaborate through Mekong Net, a network of government, civil society and academic actors. Under IP2, DRAGON has supported a series of seminars and workshops on climate change impacts in the Delta, and also (per Outcome 1 above) the initiation of eleven student research studies into climate change impacts and the implementation of renewable energy (RE) initiatives in the Delta. DRAGON networks actively in academic and technical spheres to share and promote research results. Although there is little concrete evidence to date of influence on policy or practice decisions coming from research by DRAGON students, policy recommendations from the two regional technical fora DRAGON has hosted have been delivered to relevant government bodies. , The organisation has very thoroughly pursued its activities as agreed under IP2, in terms of ensuring very direct engagement of students with grassroots women and men farmers; moving from there to integrate local knowledge and academic theory; disseminating results among MekongNet members and government representatives from related Ministries and Mekong delta provinces; and consistently pursuing uptake of this approach in wider academic and technical circles.

Collaboration with academic research institutions has also been used as a channel for influence in Laos. The example of integration of gender into four subjects in the WRM syllabus at the National University of Laos, supported by the Gender and Development Association, is noted above. Noted also that Champassak University joined together with the Gender Development Association in following the results of a Sao Baan research exercise conducted by CLICK in southern Laos. This exercise combined with strong GDA female professionals as role models, has motivated Champassak University to empower their female staff to further develop their research skills.

Strengthening collaboration between academics and researchers, and CSOs and communities, has been a key IP2 focus in Thailand. The Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) of Chiang Mai University has been an important partner, as in the example above of supporting the People's EIA on the Yuam/Salween Diversion project; also in direct facilitation of dialogue between academics and CSOs around Water Resource Governance and related issues. Dr Malee Sitthikriengkrai of CESD was interviewed for the evaluation, and described CSD's role as enabling community knowledge, both through support to community action research, and also through developing relationships between technical researchers in different disciplines, and communities, to allow for mutual understanding, respect for each other's particular knowledge and skills, and establishment of collaboration on that basis.

The relatively open context of Thailand has allowed for very frank exchange among CSO representatives, academics and others from across the region in a way which is not safely possible in more authoritarian contexts, with one example being the regional seminar on water governance and water politics in the Mekong Countries organised in collaboration with IR in November 2023.

Linking Community Action Research to Policy Influencing - Collaboration with the Stimson Centre.

Beyond academia, one example of integrating community research findings to policy influence has been IP2's collaboration with the Washington D.C-based Stimson Centre which conducts scientific research on river flows and their impacts in the Mekong river basin; explores the evidence and pathways for non-hydro renewable energy options, which recognise the need to conserve the natural resource base of the river and the ecosystem services they provide. Stimson's Mekong Dam Monitoring project combines remote sensing data with data gathered by the MRC, and more recently, river flow data gathered through community research, including communities where this has been initiated with IP2 support.

Brian Eyler of the Stimson Centre said frankly that policy makers 'don't want to listen to communities', but that community-generated data can have impact on policy when it is integrated with what is recognised as 'scientific' data and branded as coming from the Stimson Centre. He spoke of the importance of respectful engagement with community researchers, rather than an extractive approach, and gave the particular example of using community data from the Sesan river basin to address the issue of dry season flash flooding caused by sudden releases from upstream hydro dams.

The river gauge installed by the MRC had clearly not provided data to allow prediction of and early warnings for floods. Presentation of data from communities, together with that from other sources, ultimately led to the MRC installing a further gauge and improving data for predictions. Community data has also fed into the combined feed shared with the MRC from all Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian dams in the 3S (Sesan, Sekong, Sreh Pok) basin. The Centre's 3S report, while highly technical, is now one of their most popular, with a high number of views on their website.

Brian Eyler also spoke of

- the importance and impact of IP2 consistently enabling communities' voice in public fora at regional and global level, particularly women's and Indigenous people's representation, and
- consistently enabling intra-region linkages for learning, between the different Mekong countries, noting that it is far more common for OECD-based organisations to rely on linkages between individual Mekong countries and the West.

7. 2. 7: Channels to influence policy makers in Laos:

The establishment of the National Dialogue process in Laos has opened a potential channel for greater influence, which Oxfam has taken up. The Dialogue was initiated by researchers from across different national government agencies in collaboration with IP2 partner Green Community Alliance (GCA), and further included academic researchers. CSOs, including Oxfam and additional IP2 partners, were invited to join the second and third dialogues. As an officially sanctioned process, this does provide a very safe space for influence.

The <u>Gender in Just Energy Transition</u> event in Vang Vieng was organised by Oxfam in Laos in partnership with the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) with the aim of ensuring no one is left behind and everyone benefits equally from the energy transition. The event was not formally part of IP2, being funded by DFAT through another project. This did however form part of the group of closely related projects with very direct IP2 team input which have effectively formed an 'ecosystem' reinforcing IP2 effects. The majority of the participants (58 total) at the Vang Vieng event were government officials from various ministries (at least about ten were MEM's Women's

Union members) and about six from INGO/CSOs. No IP2 partners were present. The event included a presentation by MEM, the Ministry of National Resources and Environment (MoNRE), Lao Women's Union, ASEAN Centre for Energy and six presentations by Oxfam (all presented by Oxfam staff); panel discussions (all moderated by Oxfam staff) and small group discussions to put forward a vision and plan for the next four years for just energy transition and gender.

7. 2. 8. Traditional and New Media

<u>Women's Voice Radio</u>, based in Kratie province of Cambodia, was an innovative partner in IP1, in providing a platform for emerging women community leaders to share information on their communities and WRM issues with a broad audience through the dedicated Women on Air program. Women's Voice Radio has continued to provide a platform for direct expression of community voices, which may be explicitly critical of local government actions, but has so far remained safe from government reprisal, possibly as it does not take an explicit and direct editorial position itself, possibly also as the voicing of discontent at this level is seen as a necessary safety valve. Several women and other community leaders who have been trained and supported under IP2 have continued to speak out via Women's Voice Radio.

Under IP2, a small grant was provided to the radio for the production of four videos on impacts on indigenous communities above and below one hydro dam in the area, and these were disseminated online. Mr Samrith, the founder and director of the radio station, said that in one instance, where an indigenous community was isolated because of lack of a bridge, he prepared both radio and video material on the situation, which garnered over 85,000 views; and the government department responsible promptly provided the necessary funding and other support for the missing bridge to be built.

Through the Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh, IP2 supported the development of a video, Face of the Mekong in partnership with the Kudu Production Company. This was centred on Sai, one of Cambodia's foremost internet influencers, and tracking him as he journeyed downstream, interacting with Khmer and indigenous communities, and noting the condition of riparian communities as he went. This aimed to show basic issues about life, livelihoods and resources and potential impacts on them, in a non-confronting way. Over a thousand students participated in the production, and the first screening, as part of Mekong Discovery Day at the Cambodia International Film Festival, drew a thousand viewers, with Mr Chea Sopheap, director of Bophana, estimating that up to a third of them were 'policy makers', with prominent representation from the Ministries of Agriculture, Culture, Environment, Women's Affairs, Justice, Foreign Affairs, and the National Election Committee, as well as many Ambassadors, representatives of the Royal Palace, the Office of the Council of Ministers, and numerous NGOs. There was an encouraging response from one Secretary of State from the Ministry of Culture – speaking of the importance of preserving local culture.

Mr Sopheap said the Bophana Centre was choosing the path of 'soft advocacy', and that it was important to know 'where the red lines are'. He stressed the importance and effect of social media, noting that the former Prime Minister had instructed all of his Ministers to develop online profiles on Facebook and other platforms – possibly implying that as well as this being a means of communicating the government line, it could be intended to show some openness to feedback.

The other principal media strategy used under IP2 was a course run by the Thailand-based Earth Journalism Network, for a group of eight journalists considered to be potentially sympathetic to the issues faced by riverine communities in the face of hydro dam development and other changes to the Mekong ecosystem. This involved introduction to the issues and exposure to communities, with the goal of enabling them to research and publish stories that the broader public could relate to, and thereby broaden support for community issues, and alternatives to hydroelectric development.

Both staff of EJN and one of the participating journalists were interviewed. Positive results as assessed by staff included:

- Integration of gender perspectives into journalists' stories on hydro dams and other WRM issues - before, this had been largely absent
- More coverage of indigenous communities
- Greater overall consciousness of the issues on the part of journalists

Limitations observed by the partner were that the kinds of stories that the journalists were pursuing were not the ones that attract the most public attention. There is more interest in spectacular events, 'victim' stories, or stories about the bad behaviour of Chinese engineering companies. To date, stories have been published mainly on Oxfam internet sites and through participating journalists' own social media. EJN also noted that there had been more outmigration from riverine communities by men than women, and as a result, women were more visibly assuming community leadership roles, and were more often present on panels. EJN said the approach to date had been to recruit journalists to the program who had a focus on environmental and community issues. In the future, it would be beneficial to recruit those who specialised in women's issues, without necessarily having a prior environmental background.

The one participating journalist who had responded for interview said that he now does more work focused on gender. He had really appreciated the course, and said that in its second phase, the process had been much more participatory and engaging. He gave an example of the new perspectives he had gained - seeing the empty ceramic jars that had previously been used for *pa la* (fermented fish) lying around villages or being used for flower planters, which graphically illustrated how the fish catch had diminished: *pa la* used to be made from the abundant small fish that seasonally migrated up the rivers, but which are now drastically diminished or have disappeared, being the species that are most vulnerable to mainstream dams.

Both EJN staff and the journalist interviewed said that two years was too short a duration for the program to really be effective, and that a future phase should be longer.

Direct media engagement by IR has been a core strategy to amplify community and civil society voice, promote public debate, where space allows, and seek to influence policies. This is explicit in the IP2 Theory of Action. IP2 annual reports provide full detail and statistics for this activity: Media briefings on effects of the Lancang dam cascade led to articles in the South China Morning Post, the Bangkok Post, The Diplomat, and several other outlets. In both 2022 and 2023, media briefings on the proposed Salween/Yuam diversion were organised, followed by visits to the affected area and community. Another media trip was organised to the Pak Beng dam site. A media trip to the Sanakham dam site with staff of the Thai National Human Rights Council was also organised in 2023.

IR has maintained systematic media tracking throughout the IP2 implementation period: IR staff have been cited on issues of water resource governance and related community impacts, livelihoods and civil rights, in over 200 articles in multiple media outlets. Social media views as recorded have attracted tens of thousands of views – numbers actually recorded do not pick up the probably much greater exposure through sharing and citation elsewhere.

7. 2. 9. Mobilisation of young people

The initial IP2 design document notes the significance of demographics in the Mekong subregion, with a high proportion of young people, and also the success of previous strategies in the MRWGP for the inclusion of young people in the modes which are relevant to them. A strategy is not articulated beyond that, but some key points noted through the evaluation data collection process have been:

- Focus of the DRAGON project through Can Tho University, which harnesses the engagement and commitment of young people around environment and climate change impacts in the Mekong Delta, to undertake solution-focused research.
- Evidence of inclusion of young women and men and supporting them in community leadership roles in Cambodia, through the FPAR process and other project activities, for example the solar program on Koh Snenh being managed by a team of young women; 3SPN's specific focus on developing young women leaders from indigenous communities in Ratanakiri
- Mainstreaming of GIA and FPAR tools into the curriculum of the National University of Laos, facilitated by IP2 partner GDA, introducing these concepts and approaches to a whole cohort of emerging water professionals.
- Young women leaders supported through IP2 have been particularly prominent in presenting on Women's Voice Radio in Cambodia, enabling them to be heard more widely, and giving the listening public a clear demonstration of young women's ability.
- Use of media strategies which are accessible and meaningful to young people; particularly social media. The production of <u>Face of the Mekong</u> involved up to a thousand mainly young volunteers; and collaborations with journalists to conduct citizen journalism trainings, targeting community youth and women in the Salween and Mekong basins.

7. 2.10. Summary of Findings: Outcome 2

- IP2 has effectively provided engagement platforms of civil society actors, academia, community and others in engagement with national and regional WRG policy and practice.
- Clearest and most consistent success has been in supporting platforms for engagement, including networks and other structures which provide access for the voice of previously disregarded or marginalised groups.
- Engagementhas not yet resulted in demonstrable influence or change in all instances, although this needs to be viewed with a consideration of realistic timelines for achieving

- actual policy and practice influence. Platforms supported now have greater capacity to achieve future influence.
- The forms engagement has taken have varied widely across the region, depending on the specific circumstances and constraints in the political environment. IR and Oxfam have been agile and effective in identifying and pursuing the most workable strategies per country context, and issues including particular policy developments, opportunities presenting, project planning issues and other operational matters.
- Riverine communities themselves have had had direct engagement in several national-level processes, and direct dialogue with national actors, particularly in Thailand.
 Elsewhere in the region, communities' engagement with national and regional dialogue and process has largely been mediated through national-level CSOs, which have been increasingly informed by community knowledge and priorities, significantly through IP2-supported initiatives.
- Engagement of community representation direct to regional and global for a has been a significant achievement of IP2, and in particular, supporting emerging community leaders – including women, Indigenous, young people and others having had little public voice – to engage confidently and consistently.
- IP2's achievement in enabling the voice and leadership of Indigenous women and other
 marginalised people in WRG at national and international level has been noted and
 valued by numerous other actors in the sector.
- Supporting communities and CSOs to develop an evidence base for advocacy and influence has been a critical and successful strategy, integrating different streams of Community Action Research with collaboration with academics, government and other researchers to present data which is both grounded and technically credible.
- Utilisation of both 'old' and new media has been consistent, agile and effective, and in particular the use of social media channels for influence where other public channels are closely constrained.

7.3. OUTCOME 3

Target government and private sector actors at the national and regional levels increasingly commit to regional and international standards and good practice: and include the perspectives of civil society in hydropower and RE policies and plans

Three intermediate Outcomes were set out under this:

- 3.1 Increased understanding and awareness of energy consumers, CSOs, policy makers and financiers of the impact and sustainability issues with hydropower energy production and the availability of alternative, less harmful energy options.
- 3.2More diverse actors are aware of and promote sustainable renewable energy options advocated by CSOs and other organisations

and

3,3 Governments, regional institutions, developers, and financiers increasingly aware of and include community and civil society perspectives in hydropower and RE development policies and plans

Results as represented in the Indicator Tracking Table are:

- For the overall Outcome, just 3 out of a targeted 18 national and regional actors improving their compliance with international standards (noting that this is based on the Outcome as originally framed); but 14 out of a targeted 24 government and private sector actors including community and civil society perspectives in their policies.

Against the first intermediate Outcome, just 18 out of 50 targeted actors are recorded as having shown greater awareness of sustainability issues of hydropower, and availability of RE alternatives.

For the second, against the target of 1148 cases or evidence of diverse actors (Govt, PS, CSOs, community) aware of and/or promoting sustainable renewable energy, 1958 were recorded as achieved; though this indicator covers a very broad range of possible activities and actual impacts

For the third the target of 28 instances or evidence of targeted actors (government, regional institution, developer, financier) aware of and/or including CSO/community recommendations in their policies and plans, a total of 23 are recorded as having been achieved.

For the third intermediate outcome, evidence cited in the target tracker shows most targets approached or exceeded. This is mainly in the form of dissemination of information, through media communications and public events. Carry-through from this to enduring awareness of those targeted cannot necessarily be deduced.

7. 3.1. Overview

From both project documentation and data gathered during the Evaluation process, there is relatively sparse concrete evidence of improved compliance by government and private sector actors with better standards and practice. The change of wording for Outcome 3 in the NCE design, to 'commit to..' rather than simply 'comply with' reflects implementation experience in the first years of IP2, reinforced by the refreshed PEA. It is stated frankly in the first annual IP2 report that achieving compliance with international standards is 'a long-term goal' noting that the original Outcome was envisaged within an 8-year timeframe, though this can still read as ambitious. The second annual report notes that no instances of improved compliance had been noted. It is also underlined in project documentation that policy change, when it does occur, does not always flow to practice change. As has been closely documented in the refreshed PEA and elsewhere, civil society and advocacy space has become further constrained in all countries of the region throughout the implementation period, and there have been serious legal sanctions in some instances where civil society actors made overt criticism of government policy. Headway on renewable energy roll-out has been limited given that major IP2 engagement really only commenced in 2023.

However, it does also seem reasonable to state that, in the face of the multitude of constraining factors, important steps have been taken and some initial achievements can be flagged. There has been demonstrable change at least in public position by several key actors. These include:

- Official statement from the Cambodian Minister for Mines and Energy of a moratorium on construction of hydro dams on the Mekong mainstream until at least 2040, and commitment as part of the country's Power Development Plan to ambitious Renewable Energy targets for the country. This was also formally announced at COP28 in December 2023
- Commitment of the Nam Ngiep1 Power Company to ISO 14001 environmental
 management standards, and to ADB Safeguards, for the hydro dam they are building in
 Bolikhamxay province of Lao PDR. Nam Ngiep 1 is a consortium of international
 investors, including EGATi (Thai electricity authority international arm), Europe-based
 corporations and the Lao government.
- Development of the Thai National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, with a particular focus on Thai outbound investment
- Kasikorn Bank (Thailand)'s announcement of a responsible credit policy, in relation to the Luang Prabang dam.

Clearly, all of the above are the result of multiple factors, but the continued activity and engagement of IR, Oxfam and partners both during and long prior to IP2 cannot be discounted.

In moving towards the intended Outcome, it appears demonstrable that IR, Oxfam and their partners have made very creative and effective use of such space as is available to bring into public awareness and into dialogue with officialdom the issues of hydropower and climate change impacts on riverine communities, and feasible alternative strategies, noting also the Outcome wording re inclusion of civil society perspectives in policies and plans. .

There has been considerable observable progress in the raising of awareness – and triggering public statements – among key actors; with a small number of official policy statements, and fewer still clear changes in practice. There has been a demonstrable increase in the accessibility of government bodies and the possibility of engaging in dialogue around WRG and RE issues. Against this, it needs to be acknowledged that those branches and levels of government which have proven accessible and open are generally not those where key decision-making power lies in relation to large-scale water resource development .

It also needs to be reiterated that the changes observed cannot be attributed solely to IR and Oxfam activity under IP2; nor has either sought to give this impression. The principle of

'contribution, not attribution'

clearly applies. As more than one Oxfam staff interviewed stated,

'there is light in the darkness'.

One point which is made across the periodic IP2 reports is the effectiveness of GEDSI as an entry point to dialogue with government. This is seen as relatively non-threatening; national governments and their agencies are increasingly committing, at least officially, to greater gender equity, and in some cases, to broader inclusion. The gender narrative has a strong overlap with the official missions of the national Women's Unions of Vietnam and Laos - though these also have a strong focus on women's domestic roles as well as in public space. An example was the ready uptake by the Lao Women's Union of the Gender Impact Assessment tool during IP1 and by MoNRE on mainstreaming gender in the Integrated Water Resources Management Strategy

under Department of Water Resources) - at least partly because its profile had the potential to give the LWU a seat at the table in planning for major projects. As GEDSI is seen as particularly closely associated with the IP2 and Oxfam brand, with longstanding partnerships and government engagement, this has been a relatively readily accessible channel.

In engaging with the finance sector, an important entry point has been to frame issues around risks to banks – financial, reputational and other – in hydropower development, drawing on public commitments made by the banks. This has been core to the approach used by IR within Fair Finance Thailand and gives space to highlight gaps between public commitments and stated policies, and actual practice on the ground. This has the potential to move private sector actors from commitment (official, and on paper) to actual compliance in practice.

7. 3. 2. Differentiation across the region

Channels of access and influence differ widely across the countries of the region – there is no single approach, or combination of approaches, which is applicable to the whole region, so observations here are categorised by country and sector, with separate mention of region-wide bodies.

Thailand has shown the largest number of significant changes; which can be attributed in part to the continuing relatively open civil society space and freer media; but also to the duration and depth of engagement by IR and its partners, among the groups that have advocated around hydro dam construction especially. Apparent changes have included apparent modification to the Power Purchasing Agreements (PPAs) for the proposed Pak Beng and Luang Prabang dams in Laos (based on letters from the Thai energy ministry to civil society networks, and presentations by developers of the Pak Beng dam at the MRC RSF in June 2024); the intervention of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the proposed diversion of the Yuam River; also a formal letter from the Parliamentary Committee on Land, Natural Resources and the Environment to the Prime Minister stating that the Yuam diversion should be stopped; and the 2nd National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, reiterating the Thai government's commitments to comply with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, including for Thai outbound investment, among others The plan does outline several actions that incorporate civil society recommendations, and commitments to strengthen alignment with regional and international standards and guidelines related to Thai outbound investments. These include researching and implementing guidelines requiring businesses to conduct human rights due diligence, the possibility of developing EIA guidelines across borders, and exploration of a possible working system to address grievances.

Thailand has also been the locus of the deepest engagement with the <u>private sector</u>, particularly through the national network Fair Finance Thailand, advocating that Thai banks not finance dams on the Mekong. This was one factor in a commitment by the Kasikorn Bank not to finance the proposed Luang Prabang dam. Banks have also announced improved policies, referencing the U N Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; although it remains to be seen how far this stated commitment will be carried through in practice. While difficult to attribute to the project, Siam Commercial Bank, which has been a key financier of large-scale hydropower porjects in neighbouring countries became the first Thai Bank to sign onto the Equator principles in January 2022.

Myanmar has provided one interesting example, given IP2 partner KESAN's engagement with the Kawthoolei Fishery Department, provisional government of Karen state established by the Karen National Union in their controlled area. The Kawthoolei has clear policy commitment to preserving the resources of the Daw Lar Lake, including community management of aquatic resources. Continued KNU control of the area is still contested, and status after eventual settlement of the current conflict cannot be confidently predicted, but in the event of greater democratic control and federal governance post peace settlement, this would seem to offer a higher chance of continued government commitment. This approach links to the findings expressed in the refreshed PEA, regarding the value of supporting local approaches as central control is loosened.

Civil society space in <u>Laos</u> has remained tightly constrained under one-party government, despite several false dawns since the 1990s, with CSOs broadly obliged to operate only in direct partnership with government entities. Given this, the ways in which Oxfam and partners have used available space has contributed to some significant changes. IP2 partner Green Community Alliance (GCA) established an MoU with the Lao Academy of Social and Economic Sciences (LASES) to strengthen the evidence base of advice provided to the Lao government for planning decisions; the National Assembly and government agreed to take action to reform specific policies (details to be listed in final draft). The establishment of the National Dialogues mentioned above, now expanded from government researchers to include a larger number of CSOs and National Assembly members, has also been notable. Although no frank policy or practice changes have emerged from these to date, it was noted by partners that after the second National Dialogue, it had become possible for several previously sensitive issues around the environment, social and energy supply to be discussed openly on social media without fear of repercussion.

In early 2024 the Lao Prime Minister called for further development of both mines and energy to be carried out in closer alignment with principles of environmental friendliness and sustainability – although subsequently, no obvious policy or practice changes have been observed.

One direct win achieved by an IP2 CSO partner was the negotiation conducted by CLICK with the company operating the Don Sahong dam, obtaining an agreement to provide electricity without charge to affected communities, for a set period. This was carried out with the knowledge of the relevant provincial government authorities. While it was a local and temporary measure, it has been noted that in the particular government culture of Laos, where individual provinces retain a high level of autonomy, and can engage in robust (though not public) contestation with national authorities, changes initiated at local level can feed up through government and party channels to influence national government direction. (It does also need to be noted that Champassak province, where the Don Sahong dam is located, is the home of Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone's family, and links and influence with national government are particularly strong partly for this reason)

CSO actors have also noted the shift in government discourse on hydroelectric development during the IP2 implementation period as the fiscal damage of PPAs with Thailand have become obvious as part of a broader national economic crisis and deep government indebtedness driven by large-scale infrastructure investments; and also with the 2018 collapse of the Attapeu dam. There are fewer references to Laos becoming 'the battery of Asia', although there has officially been no revision of government plans for hydropower expansion as a mainstay of the country's

economy. The economic crisis is partly attributable to the financing models of both hydro and other large infrastructure projects. This is touched on in the refreshed PEA, noting the absence of Lao government equity in more recent dam projects, now 100% owned by developers, and very likely linked to Lao government credit ratings.

These developments in Laos are sometimes cited as probable influences on shifts in Cambodian government planning and public policy. The most notable of these has been the formal commitment not to construct any hydro dams on the Mekong mainstream until at least 2040, as is mentioned above. This covers the dams previously projected for Sambor, on the first rapids of the Mekong in Kratie province, and Stung Treng, a short distance south of the Lao border. The viability of the Sambor dam had been the subject of sustained questioning already. The provincial government of Stung Treng had sent a formal letter to the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME) questioning the likely impacts of the proposed dam on riverine communities and the environment. It does need to be noted that Cambodia's apparent caution in following up large-scale hydro development has not affected projections in the Cambodian Power Development Plan to increase electricity imports from Laos.

It is not possible to identify with any certainty the factors which led to the change in national government position, which has also been presented as part of the broader strategy of greatly increased RE targets set out in the national Power Development Plan. The mainstream dams were of very questionable engineering and commercial viability. Stung Treng riverine communities and CSOs have also raised the question of what will happen after 2040.

Civil society access to government in Cambodia has changed noticeably through the implementation period of IP2. The most significant instance is in dialogue with the Secretariat of the National Mekong Committee (CNMC), which brings together representatives from ministries and authorities across national government – see below regarding the overall shift of the Mekong River Commission and its advice to the National Committees to engage directly with civil society. Both IP2 partners and Oxfam itself have been in direct and frank dialogue with the Secretariatsince 2021, raising issues of concern to communities and relevant to international standards in policy and practice. This began with a consultation meeting on the report of the pilot of Joint Environmental Monitoring (JEM) of the Don Sahong and Xayaburi hydropower development projects, and led to ongoing engagement with Oxfam and RCC members in regard the Procedures for Notifications and Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) of relevant projects in the Mekong. Through this, recommendations from CSOs and Communities were submitted to CNMC/MRC on the proposed expansion of the Don Sahong hydropower project. This has been of relatively limited impact to date, as the CNMC is not perceived as carrying significant weight in decisions around hydro dam construction or other areas relating to WRM. It does, however, represent a significant precedent in access to government. There is likewise ready and cordial access to the Ministry of the Environment; but this is similarly perceived as carrying relatively little weight in major infrastructure decisions. The Ministry of Mines and Energy is considered to carry the most heft in matters around energy policy and infrastructure, and has been perceived as relatively closed to CSO engagement and concerns. With DFAT support, Oxfam in Cambodia has been able to engage with the MME since mid-2022, when one Oxfam staff member was engaged by DFAT through the Australia Mekong Partnership to join a Mining Regulator Governance initiative where Oxfam and two other NGOs together with MME

colleagues joined an exchange program and short course in Brisbane, looking at Environmental and Social and Governance (ESG) in the mining industry. During Clean Energy Week in 2023, The OiC Country Director was invited by the Australian Embassy to a courtesy gathering where the Minister of MME was invited to talk about energy transition in Cambodia. OiC has reported very open dialogue – though as yet no demonstrable shift in policy and practice that could be ascribed to this. The Cambodian parliament has also announced plans to build six clean energy plants though with little more specific detail to date; also increasing solar electricity supply to two gigawatts, as part of the Power Development Plan mentioned above. Noting, however, that hydropower is still considered 'clean'.

There had already been some shift in Cambodian government responsiveness to some level of community concerns compared with previous years. In most fishing communities interviewed, they said that when illegal fishers were observed, the local police came when called, and would confiscate and destroy electric shock and other illegal tools. This is a contrast to earlier stages in the development of community fisheries organisation, where police would often be unresponsive; fisheries officials had no fuel for their own boats, and in one recorded case, police arrested the community fisheries people who had confiscated electric shock equipment, and charged them with theft. In one community in Kratie, members said one reason for an apparent improvement in fish catch in the last couple of years was the government intervening to stop wide netting across the mainstream to catch the seasonal upstream migration of fish. The commune councils were frequently referred to as first point of contact with officialdom, and generally being responsive.

Both government and private sector in <u>China</u> have commonly been perceived as among the most impervious to community voice and immediately resistant to pressure to comply with international standards. However, IR was able to arrange a closed-door webinar in 2021 with the International Institute for Green Finance, a Chinese umbrella body for responsible infrastructure financing, and to share the Riverscope tool for assessment of environmental and community impacts of energy infrastructure with them.

7. 3. 3. Influence and change with regional /global bodies

There have been two substantial engagements with staff of the Asian Development Bank, to apparently high level. IR staff joined multiple meetings with ADB management and board members around the Bank's energy policy. Purpose of the meetings was reported as awareness raising around WRM issues, though with no change noted in the Bank's updated 2021 energy policy or subsequent guidance on hydroelectricity development.

The major change in access, dialogue and apparent policy during IP2 implementation has been with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat. In the final evaluation of IP1, both MRC staff and Oxfam personnel who had sought to engage with the commission were interviewed, and there did not seem to be a significant degree of real openness to CSO/community concerns. Major shift has occurred, with consistent engagement and apparent responsiveness. The major starting point was the Regional Stakeholder Forum in 2021, following recommendations from civil society participants, the MRC produced a Gender Action Plan. During the low-flow event of the Mekong in 2022, the Rivers Coalition of Cambodia(RCC) advocated to the MRC to commission a study of the phenomenon; its causes, particularly relating to hydro dams and

climate change, and impacts on fisheries and other livelihoods. This was not the first report on low flows undertaken by the MRC, but this could be taken as one indication of increasing congruence between MRC and civil society agendas. There has been substantial change around the process of MRC engagement with CSOs, with the establishment of an annual MRCS – CSO informal dialogue, and an MRC roundtable. These give more opportunities for open and frank discussions than is possible through the Regional Stakeholder Forum and other large events. One small but significant detail is the provision of translation during the Regional Stakeholder Forum and CSO dialogues, since December 2023. This is a practical measure ensuring a more realistic basis for community engagement.

This has been a highly significant change; also one for which a significant contribution can reasonably be ascribed to persistent constructive engagement by Oxfam and IR both during IP2 implementation, and previously, under IP1 and other initiatives At the same time, as the PEA details, the influence of the MRC and its recommendations on the national governments of the participating nations has not strengthened, and is not a major driver of policy or practice change in itself.

MRC staff interviewed spoke very favourably about the ways in which IR and Oxfam had engaged, noting specifically that IR had brought a lot of knowledge about banks and other lenders, which had led to some change in approach; and that Oxfam came with a very deep knowledge base. They also said that IR could sometimes be 'too critical', but had also been amenable to engaging on the same issues through less confrontational approaches. DFAT staff interviewed spoke particularly positively around IR's mode of engagement with the MRC and its enabling of other CSOs in doing so.

Of the National Mekong Committees, Cambodia's has been most notable for responding to the MRC's recommendation to engage with civil society. Political sensitivities in Vietnam and Laos have to date not allowed realistic space for CSO engagement with the respective NMCs.

The situation which most plainly demonstrates the limitations of the MRC as a mechanism to ensure compliance with standards, and possibly the disconnect between stated government policy and actual planning decisions is the proposed Funan Techo Canal in Cambodia, which would link the major rivers directly to Cambodia's coast, rather than through Vietnam, and thus provide direct port access. Likely environmental impacts on Vietnam particularly through massive hydrological change would be great. MRC protocols designate notifying countries (which initiate projects) and notified countries (which would be affected). Any project must be under the terms and conditions of the law, but notified countries do not have any right of veto. This is not the case for the proposed Funan project. the Vietnamese government initially expressed deep concern about the probable impacts of the project, but the Cambodian government is still proposing to proceed. In August 2024, the official Vietnamese government line changed to express support for the project; further shifts are not out of the question. The possibility of the MRC conducting or overseeing a Transboundary EIA has been raised.

There has been no opportunity for civil society, through the standard Prior Notification and Prior Consent mechanism, or possibly even the CNMC, to engage with the necessary levels of government about this. Theoretically, a major project cannot proceed without consultation; but there has not been an opportunity to raise issues of concern.

This does illustrate the gap between government stated policy and actual practice – although both diplomatic and fiscal considerations could still affect the Cambodian government's final decision to proceed. Several stakeholders interviewed, from both government and civil society, said that even when sound technical evidence against a project is presented, government will often proceed in a different direction. 'Edifice complex' – the inclination of governments to project power through major visible developments – remains a significant factor even when both environmental and economic disbenefits are clear.

<u>Presence at CoP26 in 2021</u>: IR engaged with the UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights to ensure inclusion of information on the impacts on human rights of people affected by hydro dams at the 26th COP Conference on Climate Change.

7. 3. 4. Promotion of Renewable/Clean Energy

Promotion of Renewable Energy (RE) was integrated into IP2 design from the outset, and partnership with EnergyLab Cambodia began from 2020. There was also annual engagement with Cambodia Energy Week, and IP2 staff convened the Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on Renewable Energy Pathways in 2022, which generated a policy document intended for submission to ASEAN energy ministers (but was not finalised until much later. Integration of community level activity, particularly piloting of small-scale RE systems, commenced only in 2023. Measurable impacts in terms of government policy and practice are so far not clear. In Cambodia, IP2 provided a grant to Energy Lab, a social enterprise/ 'renewable energy think tank', which has pursued various channels of building RE ecosystems in Cambodia. IP2 support was in the form of CSOs and youth capacity building, production of a video for internet dissemination, and the awareness raising including Clean Energy Roadshow in 2023, targeting both the public and sub-national officials. Energy Lab were able to engage directly with the Ministry of Mines and Energy and other stakeholder on the policy influencing, and had so far encountered a level of openness and cooperation. There was concern regarding the actual level of knowledge of MME personnel engaged; for example, while the national government has set a target of 70% Electrical Vehicles by 2050, it became clear in meetings with MME staff that many did not understand what an EV was. This may be indicative in assessing the national government's stated aim of establishing six RE generating facilities by 2050. However, the formal government commitment to carbon neutrality by 2050 in the framework of the Power Development Plan announced by the Minister, and the other commitments made at COP28 make a useful basis for continued engagement with and potential influencing of government RE policy.

The Cambodian government has however supported the establishment of small-scale solar energy stations/mini-grids to rural communities previously without reliable energy access. Communities have to put up 50% of the costs. Problems have arisen when the installation work has been contracted to local private sector providers, with poor quality equipment installed and lack of proper user training on maintenance and repair, leaving several systems non-functional after a short time, and communities in debt. An IP2 grant to Live and Learn has supported both repair and sustainable maintenance training to communities. Funding for a small-scale solar plant, and training of a team of local technical team, especially young women in maintenance was also provided directly to Oxfam's community-led RE initiative Koh Snenh, a Mekong island community in Stung Treng province. Due to difficulty of access across the river, the community could not rely on commercial contractors for maintenance.

Oxfam has also engaged with SOGE, a private sector company which has specialised in setting up solar-driven irrigation systems, and directly supports community systems enabled by Oxfam, giving ten-year warranty for functioning. SOGE's direct engagement in IP2 has been through workshops and dialogue, but has been a direct provider in related Oxfam projects. Ms Thida, co-owner of the company explained that many farmers and farming communities were initially hesitant to take on solar-driven irrigation schemes, as they had been previously burned by unsatisfactory private solar providers. SOGE's operation guarantees 48-hour response to maintenance needs, and has enabled replacement of diesel driven pumps on areas of up to 1300 hectares per system. All participating farmers need to register their land for the agreement; Ms Thida said that on average, 60% of registering farmers were women. The solar systems also have the advantage that heavy diesel pumps do not need to be carried from one location to another, which gives women far greater control.

This could be considered as an influencing strategy, through supporting a demonstrably viable RE system.

7. 3. 5. Summary of Findings: Outcome 3

- A heightened level of informed engagement with government, private sector and intergovernment bodies by civil society organisations around WRM and RE issues has been enabled through IP2
- Levels of achievement against the original Outcome greater compliance with international standards in WRM by government and private sector bodies have been limited, and the modification to 'commitment to comply' has proven to be appropriate and realistic in the operating context. Several instances where statements of policy and practice reflect such commitment have been recorded; also of government and private sector actors incorporating CSO and community views into policy. In several such instances, it seems to be reasonable to claim that actions under IP2 have been a contributing factor.
- There have been notable examples of success of community and civil society in influencing the positions and practice of Thai government and private sector actors where it appears demonstrable that IP2-supported activities have contributed significantly
- There has been a lesser amount of engagement or apparent influence to date around RE, with some significant exceptions including the Cambodian Government's Power Development Plan. However, some important initiatives have been undertaken in the relatively short period that RE has been integrated into the project structure and goals.
- The approaches taken by Oxfam and International Rivers, both their own and enabling partner organisations, have been explicitly appreciated by different actors, including some officials of national government and of inter-government bodies, notably the Mekong River Commission.
- The agencies of government which are more accessible and open to dialogue on community issues around WRM are not usually those which carry the greatest weight in related decision-making. However, Oxfam and IR have achieved some noticeable success in engaging with previously unresponsive government bodies
- Within single-party or authoritarian states, there can be persisting technocratic streams within government agencies, which are more susceptible to evidence-based arguments

- for changes in strategy. IR and Oxfam have increased engagement with these in several different country contexts.
- Some instances of access and possible influence have been achieved in contexts which
 previously seemed less amenable to civil society influence, notably via the National
 Dialogues in Laos; and KESAN's close and positive relationship with KNU in strengthening
 the Kawthoolei governance in Myanmar
- Achieving influence on government and private sector through generating market impact
 via traditional and social media has shown some signs of promise in countries where this
 is possible, notably Thailand and Cambodia. Observable impacts are so far limited, but
 it does seem that continued and expanded use of social media in particular is a strategy
 that should be further pursued.
- No single formula for successful influence on government policy and practice has become evident through the implementation of IP2. However, it does appear that the multi-pronged strategy of opening communication channels to sympathetic branches of government; building a strong evidence base via community action and academic collaboration; and raising broad community awareness and support through social and other media is an achievable strategy which can work to build a critical mass of opinion, knowledge and pressure ready for when more open and technically informed government processes evolve, and/or to take the opportunity when particular events and developments, such as the Mekong low-flow event, offer a window for introduction of CSO and community views.

8. ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE OECD-DAC CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

8.1. Impact

Impact is not assessed separately here, as it is essentially covered under the three Outcomes above.

8.2. Sustainability

In the periodic reports, the approaches to achieve sustainability emphasise strengthening of local partners and of communities themselves; and building wider networks of partners and communities that will be able to sustain their own momentum. This approach has demonstrably been followed by Oxfam and IR, and is complemented by project staffing from within the countries of the region, ensuring retention of expertise.

This is necessary but not sufficient to ensure continuing benefits from the project. The progress achieved in building partner and community capacity, and women's leadership, has been substantial in the timeframe of IP2, but it is unlikely the momentum could be sustained without further external resourcing. Some of the most positive factors towards sustainability within the program are 1) the building of networks, ensuring that peer support can be provided and joint action undertaken with relatively low financial and management inputs from Oxfam/IR management, 2) the emphasis on partner autonomy in moving the broad strategy forward, which could lead to a diminution of external resources required for ongoing work, and 3) the continued building of communities' own capacity, aligned with the stated aim above. These three approaches will not ensure post-IP2 sustainability in and of themselves, but should lead to tapering requirement for external resourcing

The linking up of communities, partners, and academic and other researchers as is evident in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand particularly also works towards a more sustained impetus towards local/national direction and autonomy, as a greater level of intellectual and analytic resource comes from within the region, and existing state budgets.

One instance which emerged repeatedly in Cambodia data collection was the future of community fisheries management. Several groups indicated a need for continued or refreshed resourcing, to cover items such as maintenance of boats and motors, or replacement of life vests. Of the active community fisheries groups across the country, a high proportion had their origin with external donor funding. A few examples were cited of community initiatives to raise their own funds to cover these costs - donations made via the local pagoda; agreement to participating families to pay a small levy; and in one instance, a community setting up a small seasonal tourism business. For broader sustainability, securing government resourcing seems to be essential. This should be feasible in the medium term given the rhetorical value at least that national and provincial governments place on community management of fisheries. One suggestion was that there should be advocacy to the Ministry of the Interior (with which local organisations are registered) to in turn direct that the local commune councils should prioritise support to community fisheries through their own budgets, which it was claimed are often underspent. As is noted above, an EU grant for the support of community fisheries groups is administered through commune councils, but access to date appears to have been uneven.

8.3. Efficiency and Effectiveness

8. 3. 1. Value for Money and Administrative Procedure

Periodic reports particularly cite value for money, with standard processes of seeking comparative bids; also noting collaboration with other agencies in the hosting of events or use of existing premises and other resources; all of which seem to be clear. On a fundamental level, Oxfam and IR's long-established practice of working through local partner organisations and prioritising in-region competence in staffing optimises retention and growth of capacity and continuity in relationships, which have a direct cost-benefit relationship in addition to their basis in development philosophy.

In discussion with PMU staff, the routine practice throughout implementation has been the front-ending of payment tranches to partners. This has mitigated the frequent delays caused by slow and complex government processes for project approval: continuation of project deliveries is not delayed while interim reports and acquittals are processed. It was also acknowledged by PMU that this does have the counterbalancing result that no funds are returned by partners to PMU for possible reallocation but are rather expended on activities and costs that partners have identified are consonant with their existing agreement with IP2.

On balance, the front-ending practice is probably a greater asset to efficiency rather than the reverse, given the multiple delaying factors inherent in budgeting, remitting and tracking across multiple partners and countries and a high level of government intervention.

It is noted that the delays in expenditure through the project's lifetime had the net result of an significant underspend, which it was negotiated could be allocated to the No-Cost Extension which now runs to April 2025.

Complexity and slow speed of approval processes were cited by both staff and partners, across all countries, though with more severe manifestations in some countries than others. In all cases, this has worked against program efficiency and also against balance of resourcing and activity between the countries of the region. Vietnam was consistently cited as the most difficult example, with periods of up to one year required to gain approval of individual projects under IP2. As was cited by one partner, the general government directive is to avoid sensitive areas, but there is no clear guidance as to what constitutes sensitivity: 'we don't know where the red lines are'.

8.3.2 Impacts of Oxfam internal structure: Bureaucratic delays have been compounded by features of Oxfam's architecture, with Laos being the most acute example. The PMU has a regional project responsibility, but without a matching level of regional authority. Country level implementation is under the charge of the Oxfam body in that country, which has its main reporting and accountability line through another channel. For most countries of the region, a quite efficient collaborative arrangement has been established. This is plainly easiest in Cambodia, where the country entity co-locates with PMU, and a highly professional, outcomefocused team matrix appears to be in place. Oxfam in Myanmar appears to have found the working relationship smooth and unproblematic, and was particularly appreciative of donor flexibility in allowing funding to be reallocated to essential livelihoods and other activities to ensure partner resilience during conflict periods when project implementation to plan was not

feasible. In Laos, the effects of disjunction in structure appear to have been compounded by high staff turnover and related difficulties of remote working relationships with staff unfamiliar with Oxfam ways of working. The failure to secure an MoU with the government of Laos for IP2 implementation has been an obvious constraint; but it has been argued that a greater degree of leeway for operations should have been possible with more functional intra-Oxfam processes. More than one partner in being interviewed by the consultant evaluator expressed very specific discontent with Oxfam in Laos' ways of working, and the poor quality of the working relationship.

8. 3. 2. Response to Pandemic Conditions

With inception of IP2 occurring almost simultaneously with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Oxfam, IR and partners were faced with the same constraints on movement, communication and action as other development agencies, government or non-government, but rapidly took up and adapted different modes of online and other distance communication and operation. This also penetrated to the implementing partners. Pandemic restrictions on movement and face to face interaction were on the one hand y a factor in accelerating the development and functioning of virtually-run networks from local to regional level, as grassroots people, often with limited formal literacy, realised the potential of connecting with peers and others via internet. However, this was more than outweighed by the impact of radical reduction of face-to-face meetings, conferences and other interactions which are critical to the building of understanding and trust, and conversations which do not occur in prescheduled and structured online meetings.

Direct impacts of the pandemic were the illness of many partner staff and community members, with resulting reduction in previously planned activities, and/or reduced quality of processes requiring inputs from multiple parties.

Indirectly, as was noted in the refreshed PEA, the pandemic has had enduring effect on civil society space, as government restrictions on associations and gatherings introduced on public health grounds interacted with regulations and scrutiny introduced to address corruption (most notably in Vietnam), and led to the longer-term weakening of civil society networks.

Taken together, these pandemic-related issues can be seen as a significant factor in delays or shortfalls in reaching targets under all three Outcomes.

8. 3. 4. Internal assets contributing to efficiency

Major assets for Oxfam and IR in efficient operation and delivery have included 1) the relatively long service of several staff in both PMU and the Oxfam country teams, meaning a considerable depth of knowledge of both content and operational issues, and 2) the number and duration of partnerships: there has been a critical mass of long-standing partnerships predating IP2, and in some cases, IP1, which has allowed for efficiencies in operations and accountability procedures, given familiarity with systems, and also an apparently high degree of mutual trust and respect. Of those partners outside of Laos questioned on their experience of working with Oxfam in IP2 implementation, nearly all expressed satisfaction. The main concern raised was with regard to delays in project approval and funding flow, although in most cases, this was accompanied by recognition that the processes of approval and funding remittance were not in Oxfam's sole control, and were most frequently driven by national government regulation and related factors.

8. 3. 5. Assets in partnership and portfolio

Long-term partnerships with competent local, national and regional CSOs were complemented by the strategic provision of small grants to small and relatively inexperienced and informally structure emerging organisations with specialist focus. Two examples with which the evaluation engaged were MHSS and WLAD, both in Cambodia, with focus inclusion respectively of people with diverse SOGIE and People with Disability. Both organisations were very pleased with the extent of activity and change that they had been able to achieve with relatively small funding amounts, and the Oxfam/IR consortium was able to release grants of that level with relatively simple standards of organisational assessment and accountability.

IP2's status as one of a trio of projects in the larger Oxfam Mekong Regional Water Governance Program also had benefits, as the three component projects functioned in overlapping areas, with some complementary activities which reinforced each other at critical points, while allowing IP2-specific funding to continue to be targeted to activities as per design. IP2 is also a component of the IR South-East Asia program, and links closely to other IR programs, for example in China and cross-regional thematic programs. As with Oxfam programs, this enabled sharing of knowledge, insights and strategies.

8. 3. 6. Function of the Oxfam-IR Consortium

The consortium structure of International Rivers and Oxfam allowed combination of the two organisations' complementary areas of focus, expertise and relationships. There was also an advantage in mutual familiarity, as two IR staff with direct responsibility for IP2 had previously worked on Mekong issues as Oxfam staff over a substantial period. Each carries a high degree of credibility with particular partners and interlocutors from local to global level, and the two organisations enjoyed a longstanding cordial and respectful relationship, albeit with significant differences of policy and approach. Ideally, consortium structure would have allowed a whole which was greater than the sum of its parts.

This turned out not to be the case, particularly for IR with its much smaller and lighter structure and staffing complement. IR is structured essentially as a network, rather than an institution, and found that a disproportionate amount of time was taken up by focus on accountability and compliance requirements to an extent which detracted from their core business. Both parties attempted to find solutions that would allow the consortium structure to continue, but in the end, it was agreed that the best way forward was to dissolve the consortium, effective 2024, to continue through the NCE period as a regional partner of Oxfam.

8. 3. 7. Optimising of PMU Resources

Oxfam PMU staff at management level also mentioned the high proportion of their time spent i in accountability; processing and approving of grants; negotiation with Oxfam country teams, and similar', which they felt had detracted from their availability to engage with substantive and strategic issues of program content and direction. This issue would need to be addressed in a future project phase, given the imperative for greater focus on linking work and outputs at local and sub-national level to the national and regional levels, and further strengthening program coherence. Others have commented very positively on the high competency and leadership qualities of the PMU managers, and the credibility of their high-quality interventions in multiple regional and global forums, including the 2023 MRC Leaders Sumit; the First National and

Women Leaders Elevation and World Water Week, and Mekong Environmental Resilience Week at national and regional levels particularly. The example and profile of the PMU leadership, as women of the Mekong region, has also been cited as one factor in supporting and developing the capacity and confidence of other women leaders. It seems essential for several reasons to further enhance this.

8. 3. 8. The Dual Donor Structure

This links in part to the dual donor arrangement, and consequent increase in accountability and communication requirements. It has been critically important to secure the higher levels of funding and institutional support available as SDC joined as a donor; and there is major advantage in combining the two agencies' funding priorities, expertise and strategic portfolios in development cooperation in the region. These have a large degree of overlap, but also a significant amount of difference which broadens the project's scope as well as deepening the funding pool. SDC's long-term engagement in regional land governance potentially provides an important complementarity to the project.

To date, there has been some transactional cost engendered by incomplete alignment between the two agencies' accountability requirements: notably SDC's standard requirement for semi-annual as well as annual reporting. Oxfam staff at different levels reported that there was initially some difficulty in explaining issues of access to projects and partners in the field. SDC also indicated some initial difficulties in reaching understanding on roles and requirements, including access to projects and partners in the field but felt there had since been progress towards smoother collaboration and effective partnership. It seems essential that conscious effort is applied to frankly addressing any remaining points of misunderstanding in order to optimise both donors' engagement with and contribution to the project.

Donor flexibility and direct support, particularly in the case of DFAT, was cited as a significant factor in program effectiveness. Oxfam in Cambodia staff said that DFAT had 'opened doors to us which had never been open before', citing in particular the Cambodian Ministry of Mines and Energy (who in turn fed back to Oxfam staff that 'you have a good donor'). Recognition by DFAT of the need to support resilience building of Myanmar partners in the 2021 post-coup scenario meant that partners could continue to provide support and services to communities, and also pursue future funding until more regular implementation could be resumed. Reallocation of IP2 funding to essential livelihoods needs was approved by DFAT for the NCE period, in recognition of the challenges of the conflict situation.

8.4. Relevance

Evidence from the evaluation indicates that the project in its structure and mode of implementation has had close relevance—first to the riverine communities, and marginal groups within them, and secondly, to the larger population of the Mekong sub-region. The initial design was based on IR and Oxfam's long experience and engagement with stakeholders at all levels across all countries of the region, updated with close independent analysis through the PEA. On the evidence of project documentation and of direct evaluation data collection, it seems clear that the activities undertaken within each country remained in alignment with the design as expressed in both the Theory of Action and Theory of Change, despite the differences in approach driven by individual country contexts.

In engaging with communities, the evaluation team consistently found responses to the effect that the activities and targets of the project spoke to some of their uppermost priorities and concerns, in terms of maintaining livelihoods and retaining their natural resource base in the face of multiple changes. Examination of national government policies and statements across the region, and evaluators' engagement with government stakeholders through the course of the evaluation show official aims which at least in the way they are formally stated, are consonant with some of the project goals, including greater gender equity, support to women's leadership, recognition of community priorities, and commitment to clean energy. That actual government practice in most of the country is less in accord with the aim of a strengthened and more vocal civil society actually underlines the relevance of the project design.

Responses from women and men community members directly interviewed in data collection demonstrated a sometimes vehement confirmation of the project activities' relevance to their lives and circumstances, and of the importance of the changes so far achieved.

The ultimate achievability of Outcome 3 is appears more realistic in the revised framing adopted for the NCE period, and when taken in the perspective of an eight-year implementation period as was originally envisaged. The original target looks extremely ambitious when considering the relative strength of Oxfam, IR, partners and allies when compared to the combined momentum of governments and the private sector in the region, and the relatively small degree of apparent progress that has been made since major hydropower development began in the 1990s. However, progress under Outcome 3 during IP2 implementation, including concrete examples of official government and private sector policy commitment, and some shifts in the larger economic and political context, would indicate that a much larger degree of change could be possible, and the relatively small level of investment in working towards this is amply justified.

Further, investment in women's leadership and greater inclusion of people with disability, indigenous communities and other marginalised groups, as well as strengthening of community and civil society cohesion and voice has an absolute value, particularly when viewed in the broader context beyond the project plan and timelines. Riverine communities, and wider populations of the region, will unquestionably be subject to very major social, environmental, political and climate changes in the foreseeable future, of which hydropower development and climate-induced changes to river flow and ecology are just one element. Women's and community agency in voicing their needs and advocating for their rights will become only more essential.

There were some indications arising through the evaluation process that a wider range of issues beyond the health of the river system and control of its resources are bearing on communities' viability, not least population increase, out-migration, and increasing dependence on non-fishing, non-agricultural sources of income. If a further phase of the Inclusion Project is undertaken, it would seem essential to include these wider issues in both analysis and strategy.

8.5. Coherence

The Theory of Change and the Logic Model of IP2 set out a clearly coherent analysis and approach. Questions have been raised about how far coherence is discernible in implementation. One suggestion arising during the Mid-Term Review was that separate Theories of Change were needed for each country of the region, given the wide differences in politics, society, civil society space and more.

This differentiation is approached frankly in both the original and revised versions of the PEA, which nonetheless indicate that a united strategy is possible. One clear impression emerging from the evaluation is that Oxfam and IR have proceeded from a base of nuanced understanding of political and economic dynamics and available influencing space in each country, and have moulded strategy accordingly, also showing agility in adapting as the situation evolves. This is directly demonstrated by the preparation of the refreshed PEA, and reference to it in design of the NCE.

It seems evident that there has not been a consistent or symmetrical flow of concerns raised at community level flowing through sub-national to national and regional levels. A literal reading of the Theory of Change diagram would anticipate this. However, this is to be expected first, given communities' necessary preoccupation with immediate survival issues, secondly, given the lack of open civil society space, media access and other factors which are highlighted in the project design as issues to be addressed. Finally, it needs to be recognised that for a project working across multiple locations and actors in a highly dynamic political, social and environmental context, a ToC structure needs to be distinguished from a linear logframe model, recognising that positive change may occur or blockages spring up suddenly, and the essential strategy is to build enduring capacity and relationships in order to be prepared to act when events and circumstances allpw.

The relative dearth of transboundary action has been commented on elsewhere. This is not surprising given the strong pattern of national governments working very much to national agendas, without a really ingrained mechanism of consultation with neighbours - the limitation in the MRC's function is noted above. There are however examples of IP2 has enabling transboundary community engagement where impacts across national borders was immediately obvious, such as Cambodian organisations' and communities' engagement around the Don Sahong dam. Brian Eyler of the Stimson Centre specifically highlighted what he had seen as IP2's frequent enabling of cross-border linkages around research and evidence presentation, in contrast to much more siloed information flow in other regional programs he had worked with.

Work towards linkage from community to national level and beyond is evident in the project's focus on networks - both continuing support and enabling of existing umbrella bodies, including FACT and the NGO Forum on Cambodia, and the creation of the Women's Leadership Network on Fisheries, which do specifically work to create direct linkage from local to national level and beyond.

Also, experiences reported from regional gatherings show the immediate sense of coherence, shared identity and purpose which is felt by community and civil society representatives from highly diverse backgrounds, language groups and more when they are enabled to meet and engage. This would seem to be an emphatic validation of the importance of pursuing a regional strategy which includes elements from community to regional levels.

8.6. Findings against the OECD Evaluation Criteria

• IP2 has incorporated several key measures to optimise sustainability of partners' and communities activities and progress beyond the project's lifetime, but these will not be sufficient to ensure full continuation toward the three Outcomes and ultimate Impact identified without significant continuing external resourcing.

- The complex and diverse structure of the project, and its dispersal across multiple locations and levels has made efficiency particularly challenging. Countering this, Oxfam and IR have implemented several management measures to maximise efficiency, including collaboration in resource use; reliance on remote communications, and focus on in-region expertise and knowledge.
- Oxfam's complex internal architecture and lines of reporting have in some instances worked against both efficiency and effectiveness, compounding delays and uncertainty caused by national regulatory and approval requirements
- Duration of key staff tenure and depth of expertise, as well as long-established and trusting partnerships have been a major source of project effectiveness. The strategic use of small grants for emerging organisations with low administrative capacity has also delivered disproportionate benefits.
- There is clear and strong coherence in the project's design, patterns of implementation, and progress towards projected Outcomes, and in alignment with the Theory of Action despite the wide variety of activities implemented in very dispersed locations.
- The project's relevance to direct participants and intended beneficiaries is strongly borne out by the available evidence.

9. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

9.1. Outcome 1

- IP2 has achieved a high degree of success against this Outcome overall, with particularly strong results against interim outcome 1.1, with women and members of marginalised groups taking leadership roles and engaging with power holders around issues of WRG
- Against Outcome 1.2 Increased use of gender and social analysis among CSOs, private
 sector and policy makers in WRG and RE development results have been more limited,
 but with some significant successes including further uptake of Gender Impact
 Assessment by several government and private sector bodies; direct input to the revised
 national sub-decree on fisheries in Cambodia; integration of GEDSI into curriculum at
 the National University of Laos; and further uptake of Gender Impact Analysis by
 several government and private sector actors.
- Findings from both field assessment and documentation showed a particularly high rate
 of impact in fostering women's leadership and voice in Cambodia and Myanmar, and
 very notably
- Indications from field research show that there has been some negative reaction and pushback against women's greater empowerment and voice, but also that women have been successfully countering this.
- Development of the Women's Leadership Network in Fisheries in Cambodia has been a significant step towards women's leadership and collective voice, demonstrating the effectiveness of networking to support ongoing women's leadership, and providing a base for concerted influencing of relevant policy-makers in the areas of fisheries and WRM more broadly
- In Vietnam, success in this area has so far been more limited, but significant in those areas and communities where it was possible to target, noting the very entrenched patriarchal norms and structures in targeted communities.
- Indigenous women reported achieving important changes within what they described as particularly patriarchal norms, although significant work still remains to be done.
- The profile and voice of women leaders at national and regional levels has been visibly raised at national and regional levels as a direct result of IP2 intervention. Engagement in regional networks and events by community-level and other women leaders has also created or strengthened platforms for engagement and potential influence at a level not previously feasible for most women leaders from the community level.
- Under IP2 an integrated process for the development and support of women leaders
 has been built, integrating specific feminist training; recognition of women's multiple
 roles and burdens; ensuring peer support; building of networks from sub-national to
 regional level, and ensuring safe space and continuing support and accompaniment,
 and successful advancement of women's leadership at multiple levels is largely due to
 this.
- Integration of disability inclusion has been very uneven across IP2, and there has not been a clear unified strategy. There has been significant success in partnering with the Lao Disabled People's Association and change achieved through their engagement with

IP2 partners and with communities; individual Community Fisheries Groups have shown strong practice in meaningful inclusion of People with Disability, and one small-grant partnership with an organisation of women with disability in Cambodia achieved very strong results. These examples could provide the basis for a coherent project-wide strategy going forward.

- Inclusion of people of diverse SOGIE has also been uneven across the project, though
 with two very successful small-grant partnerships demonstrating new strategies for
 inclusion in WRM, and several individual communities and organisations showing
 strong practice in active inclusion. As with disability inclusion, these could form the
 basis for a clearer project-wide strategy in the future.
- A significant number of partners and other actors have now incorporated gender analysis
 and impact into their planning and reporting, but at lower rates than anticipated. Further
 government and private sector uptake of Gender Impact Analysis, following successes
 under IP1, has been more limited than hoped.

9.2. Outcome 2

- IP2 has effectively provided engagement platforms of civil society actors, academia, community and others in engagement with national and regional WRG policy and practice.
- Clearest and most consistent success has been in supporting platforms for engagement, including networks and other structures which provide access for the voice of previously disregarded or marginalised groups.
- Engagementhas not yet resulted in demonstrable influence or change in all instances, although this needs to be viewed with a consideration of realistic timelines for achieving actual policy and practice influence. Platforms supported now have greater capacity to achieve future influence.
- The forms engagement has taken have varied widely across the region, depending on the specific circumstances and constraints in the political environment. IR and Oxfam have been agile and effective in identifying and pursuing the most workable strategies per country context, and issues including particular policy developments, opportunities presenting, project planning issues and other operational matters.
- Riverine communities themselves have had had direct engagement in several national-level processes, and direct dialogue with national actors, particularly in Thailand.
 Elsewhere in the region, communities' engagement with national and regional dialogue and process has largely been mediated through national-level CSOs, which have been increasingly informed by community knowledge and priorities, significantly through IP2-supported initiatives.
- Engagement of community representation direct to regional and global for ahas been a significant achievement of IP2, and in particular, supporting emerging community

leaders – including women, Indigenous, young people and others having had little public voice – to engage confidently and consistently.

- IP2's achievement in enabling the voice and leadership of Indigenous women and other marginalised people in WRG at national and international level has been noted and valued by numerous other actors in the sector.
- Supporting communities and CSOs to develop an evidence base for advocacy and influence has been a critical and successful strategy, integrating different streams of Community Action Research with collaboration with academics, government and other researchers to present data which is both grounded and technically credible.
- Utilisation of both 'old' and new media has been consistent, agile and effective, and in particular the use of social media channels for influence where other public channels are closely constrained.

9.3. Outcome 3:

- A heightened level of informed engagement with government, private sector and intergovernment bodies by civil society organisations around WRM and RE issues has been enabled through IP2
- Levels of achievement against the original Outcome greater compliance with international standards in WRM by government and private sector bodies have been limited, and the modification to 'commitment to comply' has proven to be appropriate and realistic in the operating context. Several instances where statements of policy and practice reflect such commitment have been recorded; also of government and private sector actors incorporating CSO and community views into policy. In several such instances, it seems to be reasonable to claim that actions under IP2 have been a contributing factor.
- There have been notable examples of success of community and civil society in influencing the positions and practice of Thai government and private sector actors where it appears demonstrable that IP2-supported activities have contributed significantly
- There has been a lesser amount of engagement or apparent influence to date around RE, with some significant exceptions including the Cambodian Government's Power Development Plan. However, some important initiatives have been undertaken in the relatively short period that RE has been integrated into the project structure and goals.
- The approaches taken by Oxfam and International Rivers, both their own and enabling partner organisations, have been explicitly appreciated by different actors, including some officials of national government and of inter-government bodies, notably the Mekong River Commission.
- The agencies of government which are more accessible and open to dialogue on community issues around WRM are not usually those which carry the greatest weight in

- related decision-making. However, Oxfam and IR have achieved some noticeable success in engaging with previously unresponsive government bodies
- Within single-party or authoritarian states, there can be persisting technocratic streams
 within government agencies, which are more susceptible to evidence-based arguments
 for changes in strategy. IR and Oxfam have increased engagement with these in several
 different country contexts.
- Some instances of access and possible influence have been achieved in contexts which
 previously seemed less amenable to civil society influence, notably via the National
 Dialogues in Laos; and KESAN's close and positive relationship with KNU in strengthening
 the Kawthoolei governance in Myanmar
- Achieving influence on government and private sector through generating market impact
 via traditional and social media has shown some signs of promise in countries where this
 is possible, notably Thailand and Cambodia. Observable impacts are so far limited, but
 it does seem that continued and expanded use of social media in particular is a strategy
 that should be further pursued.
- No single formula for successful influence on government policy and practice has become evident through the implementation of IP2. However, it does appear that the multi-pronged strategy of opening communication channels to sympathetic branches of government; building a strong evidence base via community action and academic collaboration; and raising broad community awareness and support through social and other media is an achievable strategy which can work to build a critical mass of opinion, knowledge and pressure ready for when more open and technically informed government processes evolve, and/or to take the opportunity when particular events and developments, such as the Mekong low-flow event, offer a window for introduction of CSO and community views.

Findings against the OECD-DAC Criteria:

- IP2 has incorporated several key measures to optimise <u>sustainability</u> of partners' and communities activities and progress beyond the project's lifetime, but these will not be sufficient to ensure full continuation toward the three Outcomes and ultimate Impact identified without significant continuing external resourcing.
- The complex and diverse structure of the project, and its dispersal across multiple locations and levels has made <u>efficiency</u> particularly challenging. Countering this, Oxfam and IR have implemented several management measures to maximise efficiency, including collaboration in resource use; reliance on remote communications, and focus on in-region expertise and knowledge.
- Oxfam's complex internal architecture and lines of reporting have in some instances worked against both <u>efficiency and effectiveness</u>, compounding delays and uncertainty caused by national regulatory and approval requirements
- Duration of key staff tenure and depth of expertise, as well as long-established and trusting partnerships have been a major source of project effectiveness. The strategic use of small grants for emerging organisations with low administrative capacity has also delivered disproportionate benefits.

- There is clear and strong <u>coherence</u> in the project's design, patterns of implementation, and progress towards projected Outcomes, and in alignment with the Theory of Action, despite the wide variety of activities implemented in very dispersed locations.
- The project's <u>relevance</u> to direct participants and intended beneficiaries is strongly borne out by the available evidence.



10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been formulated with the assumption that substantial institutional donor funding will be available for a continuation either of the Inclusion Project, or a coherent regional program of closely related work.

For Future Program Design:

- 11. The model to promote and support women's leadership as developed through IP2 should be specifically documented and shared more widely for possible adaptation and use beyond the countries where it has been most visibly used, and possibly in other program contexts. This should also be integral to any future phase of the Inclusion Project.
- 12. A clearer and more coherent strategy for the inclusion of people with disability, people of diverse SOGIE, and other marginalised groups, drawing on the diverse examples of successful practice in IP2 should be developed for any future phase of the Inclusion Project. OPDs and organisations of people with diverse SOGIE should be directly engaged in this design.
- 13. Avenues to ensure the continued resourcing of community fishery groups and other grassroots structures and networks, independent of institutional donors, need to be explored as a priority, particularly advocacy for in-country government funding
- 14. The significant differences in political and economic context and in available civil society space in each country need to be specifically articulated in developing a Theory of Change for any future phase of the Incluson Project, and also clearly reflected in the design of the Theory of Action. .
- 15. Design of a future phase of the Inclusion Project should include clear articulation as to how the successful enabling of local-level leadership, engagement and influence can more consistently fully linked up to engagement and influence at national and regional levels; also respecting the differing national circumstances and constraints as per Recommendation 4 above.
- 16. A more detailed strategy for the promotion and support of Renewable Energy initiatives from local to regional level should be developed as part of any future program, particularly looking to possible engagement with other DFAT-supported initiatives in the region.
- 17. Lessons learned from engagement with social and 'old' media across the region within the IP2 implementation period should be documented and analysed to develop a component strategy for future intervention.
- 18. Lessons learned from collaboration with academia, as both a direct channel of influence, and a partner in empowering community development of evidence for influence, should likewise be documented for future strategy development.

Operational and Structural Issues:

- 19. The disjuncture between Oxfam regional project management structure and the autonomy of individual Oxfam country teams must be addressed inf any future regional program,.
- 20. Oxfam should discuss internally and with donors ways in which current operational management and accountability workload could be streamlined and possibly

redistributed to allow greater engagement of management level staff in matters of program strategy and quality.

