



Greater Mekong Subregion

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Promoting Women's Participation in Sustainable Tourism Development Insights



An ADB-financed project supported the human resources capacity of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises Lao PDR and Viet Nam through various training. Photo credit: ADB.

This *insight* [3] was first published by *Development Asia* [4].

Introduction

In the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), unmanaged and rapid tourism growth has led to concentrated tourism in a few destinations threatening natural, cultural, and urban heritage; and contributing to undesirable social impacts. This has also limited the potential of tourism-related small and medium-sized enterprises to service tourist needs and contribute to economic growth.

Likewise, due to household responsibilities and gender biases, women in tourism-potential areas have limited access to skills training, facilities, or the business services needed to access jobs in tourism-related service and production enterprises. Although women comprise more than half of tourism workers nationally, they are underrepresented in decision-making processes, and only a few hold high-level management positions, especially in the remote and underdeveloped areas of the region.

Analysis

Developing Tourism-Related Value Chain

Approved in 2008, the Greater Mekong Subregion Sustainable Tourism Development Project aimed to help the governments of the Lao PDR and Viet Nam find a sustainable, culturally and environmentally sound, pro-poor approach to tourism and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. The project supported the implementation of the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector Strategy for 2006–2015 to increase tourism's contribution to poverty reduction by expanding the traditional community-based tourism approach to include tourism-related value chain development, improve tourism facilitation along the economic corridors, and expand public and private tourism management skills.

Demonstration projects in the Lao PDR and Viet Nam were set up to improve the environment at urban and natural tourism sites; benefit ethnic groups, minorities, and the poor; and protect vulnerable people from potential negative impacts. Tourism opportunities along roads were encouraged, and the human resource capacity of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises and public sector tourism organizations were improved through various training.

Handicraft markets, viewing points, small access roads, walking trails, tourism signage, information and visitor centers, parking areas, small river piers, community lodges, and protective and sanitary facilities were built. Tourism site

development and management plans were drafted. Training on developing marketing strategies, products, and tourism manuals were also offered to communities and private tourism operators.

Covering nine provinces in the Lao PDR and five provinces in Viet Nam, the project promoted fair partnerships among local governments and communities and the private sector in developing, operating, and maintaining community tourism facilities and services.

How Women Were Targeted

The project's gender action plan included –

- mechanisms to promote women's participation in decision-making and increase their access to tourism-related economic opportunities;
- training for communities, government officials, and other stakeholders on gender issues;
- awareness programs for communities and government officials on how to reduce the risk of human trafficking and other social risks known to be associated with tourism; and
- preparation of 14 provincial gender plans for the tourism sector.

The gender action plan was regularly reviewed in consultation with men and women project beneficiaries, community-based organizations, government officials, and other development partners.

How Women Benefited

Lao PDR

About 6,600 people (44% of whom were women) joined formal and informal skills training related to pro-poor community-based tourism, and 1,600 (41% of whom were women) participated in training to boost tourism development in economic corridors. Gender awareness seminars included government officials and business leaders. Gender- and ethnic-sensitive information and education materials were produced in the Lao and Vietnamese languages to support the seminars. Women comprised 68% of the 498 master trainers trained in small-scale hospitality management and/or sustainable tourism planning, and accounted for 52% of the 21 scholarships awarded to master trainers.

Men or women from provinces predominantly populated by ethnic groups received more than a third of the master trainer scholarships. The project provided training

for tour guides, in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and using materials World Vision developed for the regional Child Safe Tourism campaign. By the end of the project, up to 50% of working tour guides were women (female guides prefer to lead one-day cultural tours, while men prefer working as trekking guides and on multiday excursions).

In Klu village on the East-West Economic Corridor, women comprised 70% of 36 service group members, and 97% of the 63 vendors in the Luang Namtha night market in the North-South Economic Corridor were women.

Viet Nam

The training and seminars to support pro-poor community-based tourism reached about 23,000 people (53% of whom were women). There were 572 participants (65% of whom were women) participants in the project's gender-sensitive tourism awareness and anti-trafficking seminars. These seminars targeted men and women living in the East-West Economic Corridor. The project conducted gender-sensitive training and workshops to boost environmental awareness for about 2,500 tour operators and guides (59% of whom were women). Consultations with 49 women leaders helped identify gender issues and improve the design of training and awareness-raising activities.

A total of 874 tourism officials (53% of whom were women) were trained in tourism planning and management, and 218 officials (53% of whom were women) were trained as master trainers (the project fully financed all training programs, including scholarships for master trainers).

A project management team based in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, consisting of a balanced number of men and women, monitored the implementation of the gender action plan. Sex-disaggregated data was regularly included in quarterly progress reports. Counterpart gender focal points were established in the central project coordination unit and provincial project implementation units to support the preparation and implementation of gender action plans for five provinces.

Gender-sensitive community-based tourism manuals were developed for the Lao PDR and Viet Nam. There are about 18 community-based tourism or enterprise groups in the Lao PDR and 10 in Viet Nam that involve both men and women in operations, management, and monitoring. With the help of those manuals, the Lao PDR developed or strengthened 36 products and services, while Viet Nam developed or strengthened 14 products and services, which include excursions, homestays, cultural programs, food and beverage services, textile and bamboo

handicrafts, and iron handicrafts.

Participation and access to project resources and practical benefits

The community infrastructure (such as small markets, food kiosks, and tourist information centers) is providing much-needed safe public access and commercial opportunities for women. The facilities helped predominantly women-led micro and small enterprises expand and prosper. Although women's participation in civil works construction was less than 20% in the Lao PDR and only slightly higher in Viet Nam, women in both countries benefited from selling food to contractors at the construction sites. When the project closed, women used nearly 100% of newly constructed markets and other retail facilities to sell local produce, food and beverages, and locally made handicrafts.

Changes in gender relations

Women's participation in tourism planning and management workshops was more than 40%. This enables women to take a prominent role in the day-to-day management of community-based tourism and tourism supply chain ventures. Women's access to income enabled them to gain more control over household resources. In the Lao PDR, a female vendor said that her status in the household rose markedly because she was earning higher income, which paid for the household's critical expenses. This increased the "respect" she received from her husband and daughters-in-law. Another older woman said not having to ask her sons for money gave her newfound "freedom."

Contribution of gender equality results in overall project outcome effectiveness

Women who were previously poor now operate micro and small enterprises or are employed as wage-earners in hotels, guesthouses, and other small to medium-sized tourism enterprises. They typically are earning between \$5 and \$50 a day in net income, sufficient to cover a range of family expenses. The increased numbers of tourists and greater visitor spending have created spillover opportunities for other women not directly involved in tourism, for example, by creating higher demand and new markets for agricultural products. While most economic benefits

accrue to households involved in tourism, the improved community infrastructure and more revenue for communal village funds helped expand public services and access to microcredit.

Learning from experience

The Lao PDR organized the Lao Gender, Tourism and Microenterprise Development Forum to exchange lessons on (i) gender analysis using sex-disaggregated data, (ii) promoting gender equality in tourism and other sectors, (iii) monitoring the gender situation in provinces to contribute to policy and legal reform when needed, and (iv) measures to foster greater gender equality, such as quotas and booster groups for women.

Of the 231 participants (entrepreneurs, policymakers, and development partners), 131 were women. Successful entrepreneurs shared lessons and recommendations on marketing, product design, and sourcing local materials. The forum enabled the exchange of ideas between female and male micro-entrepreneurs from every province in the Lao PDR.

Viet Nam organized a GMS Conference on Tourism's Role in Poverty Reduction, in which 60 policymakers exchanged lessons on good practice approaches for increasing tourism's contribution to poverty reduction and women's empowerment. Tourism development plans were prepared for two economic corridors that promote pro-poor tourism products and services predominantly managed by women.



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Uzma Hoque develops and implements innovative solutions to address education sector challenges in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Prior to this, she led the overall coordination, management, and operational support to different sector divisions to integrate gender considerations in ADB Southeast Asia Department's overall programs and projects. Before joining ADB, Ms. Hoque spent 15 years working on women's rights and economic empowerment, child protection in emergencies, health and HIV/AIDS, and development communication with various UN organizations in Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Viet Nam, Indonesia, and the Pacific Islands.

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