Do policy makers understand the economic and social issues affecting low-income women in four Mekong countries? (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam)

Research Brief

Introduction to the Project

The project initially started as an inquiry into what happens in economic development projects in terms of empowerment of low-income women in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. To some extent our curiosity stemmed from critical reviews of common concepts used in gender and development – the 'buzzwords', as Cornwall sees it[1] – that called for a revisiting of those concepts and identifying in more detail what works and what doesn't regarding the path toward 'empowerment'. We found that the claim that economic and income-derived benefits lead to empowerment is often made without a clear understanding of what processes are at play that translate income into empowerment. The project investigators also questioned why empowerment measures are often provided as static and universal whereas empowerment may in fact be quite different and locally based in its understanding and expressions. From a previous research project that examined income generation, we also found that many forms of empowerment seemed to depend on notions of security and social protection, whether formal or informal. Hence in this current project we set to find out on a large scale (in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam) how economic development and security projects or project activities actually lead to empowerment and/or increased security, as experienced by participants, and how empowerment and security are related in the course of these projects.

In order to do that, we had to identify dozens of projects across the four countries that had a women's empowerment and/or security (and social protection) focus in their interventions. These projects were implemented by diverse organizations, including government organizations, women's unions, farmer's unions, NGOs – both local and international – and international organizations. We agreed to examine those activities not to draw any kind of evaluation of project activities but to learn about empowerment and security so that future interventions in those areas would be more effective and sustainable. The main research questions guiding the project included the following: (i) What is the meaning of 'empowerment' to the intended beneficiaries of economic empowerment projects? (ii) What types of 'security' are most important to the beneficiaries of social protection initiatives? and (iii) In what ways are empowerment and security related or interdependent in economic development projects?

It should be noted that our original title for the project was, *'What is Essential is Invisible': Empowerment and Security in Economic Projects for Low-Income Women in Four Mekong Countries.* In our previous research and project-based work, we found that the understanding and conceptualizing of 'empowerment' and 'security', as well as stated priorities, among project participants were often different from that of policymakers who came from very different social contexts, and as part of our work we attempted to understand these differences and how the views and priorities of project and policy beneficiaries might better be incorporated into project and policy design and implementation phases. (In this regard, we should mention that the new title given to us, *Do policy makers understand the economic and social issues affecting low-income women in four Mekong countries?*, could only be used internally because of the possibility that the policymakers we work with might interpret the new title as implying that they do not understand these issues; they do, of course, understand the issues, but their experiences, priorities and constraints are likely to be different from those of beneficiaries, and understanding these differences were one part of our research agenda.) We found as well that the **intangible** aspects of empowerment and security (e.g., psychological and social effects) are often de-emphasized or overlooked in favor of more tangible or physical aspects of these two conceptions, particularly that of security but also empowerment. For this reason, we decided to focus on both – increased empowerment and security – e.g., not as associated only with *being given* an income-generating opportunity or health equity card to gain the

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[1] Cornwall, A. 2012, 'Empowering women and girls: what works'. Available at http://www.ids.ac.uk/news/andrea-cornwall-gives-sussex-development-lecture-on-pathways-of-women-s-empowerment-programme (Sussex Development Lecture, Pathways of Women's Empowerment, January 2012); Cornwall, A. and K. Brock 2005, Beyond Buzzwords: 'Poverty Reduction', 'Participation' and 'Empowerment' in Development Policy, Overarching Concerns Programme Paper No. 10, November 2005.

tangible funds or a card that gives access to more services for low-income women, but also the increased empowerment and security associated with new roles and social status tied to *new abilities to generate income* and *new abilities to negotiate* with local authorities for health equity cards, with significant intangible as well as tangible benefits.

In order to accomplish this goal, a project team was assembled that included gender and development experts, statisticians, and PhD student assistants from the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, together with country teams in each of the four countries consisting of gender and development specialists carrying out as well as guiding and training local researchers to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The country teams were also important in the design and in the analysis phases of the research.

The project consisted of two main phases, with a first phase based on *qualitative* approaches using in-depth interviews (**IDIs**) and focus group discussions (**FGDs**) with mostly women participants of economic development and security/social protection projects (a number of husbands and male participants were also interviewed), as well as key informant interviews (**KIIs**) with practitioners, project managers and officials involved in or with expertise in such projects. The first phase aimed not to check whether empowerment/security happened according to a pre-given definition of empowerment and security, but to capture what empowerment and security meant and how they were defined by different communities based on a large set of questions around changes that occurred as a result of any particular project activity in which respondents took part. It also aimed to understand the effects of different projects, activities and initiatives in terms of what appeared to result in what beneficiaries viewed as positive, negative and neutral effects, and under what conditions the positive effects might be sustainable. (Again, the effort was not to in any way try to evaluate specific projects, but rather to understand the underlying dynamics of context and content that led to different outcomes.) The first phase took about a year and consisted of close to 480 IDIs, and dozens of KIIs and FGDs across the four countries.

The responses and the analysis derived from the first phase helped the AIT and country teams work together to design a survey questionnaire that would encompass all of the areas that had been identified across four countries as being important to the participants to achieve and sustain empowerment and security. This survey, conducted with about 400 women per country (for a total of 1600 women respondents), focused on low-income women participants and was meant both to complement the qualitative data already collected and also to add a quantitative analysis that would measure similarities and differences across four countries, as well as quantify the effect of changes from specific interventions. This second *(quantitative)* phase was completed after an additional year using digital tablets and the application 'Quick Tap Survey' for data collection to reduce the time and additional costs needed for data entry and analysis.

The results of the four-country survey have been and will continue to be analyzed, using both descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses and hypothesis tests. Initial findings of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research were presented over the preceding two months to policymakers in both Vietnam and Cambodia, and will be presented in both Lao PDR and Myanmar over the next three-week period. These discussions with policymakers take the form of 'consultative workshops' in order to not only present findings, but also to understand better the experiences and viewpoints of policymakers of many different types regarding key questions of *empowerment*, *security* and *sustainability*. Each consultative workshop ends as well with a discussion of ongoing collaborations regarding these issues, given that we intend to continue the work with policymakers in the future with the aim of continuing to incorporate the insights of this research into project and policy design. These meetings – both through consultative workshops and follow-up discussions – will also help clarify the question, 'Do policy makers understand the economic and social issues affecting low-income women in four Mekong countries?' Our impressions to date are that the closer policymakers are to the 'ground' the more they do understand these issues; however, the importance of *intangible* as well as tangible considerations, the *meaning of and*

priorities regarding security and empowerment and the importance of the key issue of *sustainability* are perhaps less well-understood by policymakers. Moreover, the ways in which these low-income women currently can and in the future might further be able to convey their views, needs and priorities will be explored in more detail in upcoming presentations and writings. For now, we will explore some of the lessons learned thus far regarding 'empowerment', 'security' and 'sustainability'.

Empowerment

As noted above, we have been studying key economic and security/social protection projects and initiatives aimed at low-income women and their families and communities. In fact, most of the projects we have examined had both economic activities and security-related activities (e.g., income-generation activities on the one hand and, on the other hand, activities related to the formation of saving groups; activities related to security included such aspects as health, employment, income, land, housing, personal and other tangible and intangible forms of security). The relationship between these economic and security-related activities is complicated, but they usually depend on each other very much. As an example, without access to health care a poor person is not likely to be able to maintain a job and obtain income, and without income a poor person generally cannot access good health care. Similarly, it is often very difficult for a low-income woman to attain income security when facing gender-based violence, or land or housing or asset insecurity. For this reason, we decided to look at both 'empowerment' and 'security' tied to economic and related projects or initiatives for low-income women as we found that *both are needed* by low-income women and their families, and we found that this is particularly true if benefits are to be sustainable, as will be discussed below.

First, we can begin with an overview of general findings tied to the idea of **empowerment**. We found that 'empowerment' is a matter of both internal valuation and external valuation: a person is 'empowered' if they feel more valued by themselves, and this is reinforced by others around them valuing them more as well (this provides positive feedback). Economic empowerment is seen here as one type of social empowerment, with the implication that empowerment can be derived from a wide range of activities, (with economic activity being only one source of positive valuation in this sense). Because we cannot assume that if a woman is working she will automatically experience 'empowerment' – e.g., this may lead to increased burdens or intra-household conflicts or even gender-based violence in the worst cases – we wanted to know under what conditions economic/livelihood activities are beneficial in this sense to the women and their families, and under what conditions it might be neutral or even harmful.

We can begin with a few generalizations that appear to be consistent across all four countries. From the interviews and survey data, we found that 'empowerment' appears to have come from *new abilities and new roles to play*, such as:
- A new ability to earn money (especially if the woman had not been doing paid work before, or is now contributed significantly to the household budget when she was not before); the money was typically used for paying children's and other family-related expenses, rather than being used solely for individual expenditures.
- Empowerment is likely to involve a woman's new roles within the family, group or community (e.g., producing something not just for the family's use, but even more so now for the market).
- This achievement of empowerment may involve new skills or knowledge, or new uses for 'traditional' knowledge: for example, older or existing skills and knowledge that in the past were only for the family's use are now directed toward earning money or providing a service to the family or community, and thus is a new use of older skills and knowledge.
- Very often the achievement of empowerment also involves a woman's new ability to speak in public, or express herself – e.g., to be able to express opinions in private or public life, and to be able to reason and negotiate more effectively.

- The achievement of empowerment can also involve a new role in decision-making (usually tied to the fact that she is now earning money, or doing other things that lead to a greater valuation of her abilities and roles in the family or community).
- This achievement of empowerment usually also involves a new sense of self-confidence tied to the woman's new roles and abilities (and perhaps new roles *outside* the home, and not just within the home – such as new leadership roles).
- This very often involves new social relationships tied to the new roles and abilities – e.g., outside the home, whether in groups or other social contexts (there are often very significant psychological benefits of having important contacts and social roles outside the limiting context of the home).
- The women may also experience a new sense of mobility tied to these new roles and abilities (e.g., she now can travel outside the home and community on her own or with others, where that was not possible earlier).
- In most cases (but not all), the women may also experience new recognition from the family, group and/or community – usually tied to the new roles and abilities such as through earning money or providing a service to others around them.

Cases that can illustrate clear cases of positive outcomes identified as 'empowerment' are seen in all four countries. We can note, for example, the weaving projects in **Lao PDR** that redirected existing weaving skills (existing skills and knowledge) for home use to new income-generating uses. The women involved in the projects generally had not been earning a money income before, but since weaving is seen as exclusively women's work, women have become able to contribute a great deal to the household income, leading in some cases to positive changes in gender relations with men contributing more to taking care of children and helping out with household responsibilities while the women work. In the most successful cases of women identifying increased 'empowerment' as a positive outcome, the men were also involved in or employed by the project and were satisfied with the outcomes. However, in one notable case some members of the community complained that the project went to only one segment of the community and that favoritism connected with this project created divisions in the community, which complicated the results. In other cases, the failure of handicraft projects also appear to be tied to conflicts between different groups (including ethnic groups) within villages or between villages, suggesting strongly that project designers need to know more about the community and potential implementation problems in order to ensure that positive benefits emerge. In **Cambodia** empowerment was often seen as the ability to talk directly with one's husband, and be 'strong' and 'brave'. The degree of empowerment was well-illustrated in the case of a leader of a producer group, tied to a national network, that was approached by the village head who lived next to her for decades and had ignored her until she became a group leader (he asked her to engage in political activities, in view of her new status). Her husband now found her opinions very 'reasonable' and said he was even 'afraid of her when she speaks' and that he was now proud that she was able to travel to the capital city (she was not allowed to before). However, as we found often happens, some of her group members spoke about her getting the most in the way of opportunities and not passing along information to them, and other social complications later emerged that we now know could have been avoided with different arrangements and group-related procedures, including the periodic rotation of activities and opportunities. In **Vietnam** as well, we found that the 'empowerment' of group leaders rather than all group members can lead to less-than-ideal outcomes, suggesting that the ways in which trainings are given and empowerment is encouraged needs to be done carefully, and not for individuals alone but for groups and communities as a whole to avoid divisions and problems that can prevent sustainable positive outcomes of such projects and activities. In **Myanmar** a project dealing with people living with HIV (PLHIV) emerged as a clear case of empowerment as well as increased security; even though the direct income-generation component was relatively small, the indirect effects were substantial. In this case, project implementers not only helped the individuals with HIV by providing them with health knowledge and health care, but also worked closely with the community to overcome stigma (PLHIV in this area previously had not been able to access housing or jobs). Moreover, as ne*w health knowledge providers* to the entire community, those living with HIV were able to gain acceptance

and respect as important community members. In contrast, the income-generation activities carried out with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in conflict-prone parts of the country – specifically, in Kachin State and Rakhine State – had relatively few empowerment benefits for many reasons, and the short-term benefits were not seen as sustainable (this will be discussed in more detail below).

The survey data suggest that the meaning of empowerment for the women interviewed had to do with being able to support their families and attain collective rather than individual goals through money-earning (as an example of tangible/visible benefits), but as expected it also – and often equally, or more so – had to do with their gaining knowledge and confidence (an example of intangible/invisible benefits). We also found that this sense of empowerment is generally not achieved if there is a lack of support from others who do not value them – e.g., a lack of support from their partner/husband, family, group, community, or society as a whole. Moreover, the qualitative data suggest that institutionally, the cases where NGOs or aid agencies stayed for a short time, gave a few quick trainings and then left were not effective in terms of achieving and sustaining of a sense of empowerment, whereas empowerment was reported as achieved and sustained particularly where institutions such as an NGO, a network or women's union remained to support the people who have received these trainings and achieved new abilities and roles in a secure and supportive environment, often with subsequent complementary projects initiated in these very low-income areas.

The survey data also suggest that in most country contexts, partners and family members were generally very supportive, and that conflicts within the family or community resulting from the projects or activities were relatively few. However, we should keep in mind that the interview data from the earlier qualitative phase indicated that in some cases partners were much less supportive and conflicts did increase; it is important to note that the women who could not (were not allowed to, or did not want to) join the project were *not* interviewed during this survey phase, since only project participants were included. (Some husbands did not want their wife to participate because it would reduce her focus on household responsibilities; some did not want her to travel outside the home or community; some were worried that she might meet other men; and in some cases it appeared that the husband was afraid that his status might be affected – that his wife gaining more attention would reflect badly on his status – although there was great variation depending on location, income level, and many other factors.) In addition, as the survey data strongly suggest, these types of projects are very important to the participants, and our experience in the qualitative phase made it clear that women did not generally want to report negative outcomes or negative aspects tied to the projects or activities. Further analysis of the survey data, and comparing these data with qualitative results, on a case-by-case (rather than aggregate) basis will give us a better understanding of these dynamics.

Other benefits picked up by the survey data include some increases in women's leadership positions as a result of these and other projects and activities (relatively few changes, but non-zero), and more significant changes in public participation and decision-making abilities. We will be able to explore these benefits in more detail across the four countries and in close comparison with qualitative results as additional analyses are conducted over the coming months.

Security

Regarding **security**, we have been looking into such questions as the women's greatest fears, needs and priorities; what they do and do not have access to; who they rely on when they run into difficulties (and why); and other key questions. We have also been looking into not only forms of security that governments can provide (the usual focus of social protection analyses), but also other important sources of security – traditional and new, personal and informal, as well as formal, and at different 'layers' of

social protection.[2] We found overall that low-income women in the four countries rely first and foremost on family, friends and neighbours (usually equally as poor as themselves), but that in some contexts 'traditional' sources of social protection such as mutual assistance groups at the village level or funeral funds groups were noted as providing support. Depending on the local context, saving groups or producer groups could provide support as well, and government support schemes on the local, provincial and national levels varied greatly in terms of effectiveness. (In several cases, for example, it was reported that 'health equity' or similar 'cards' intended for the low-income groups were available primarily to the village leader's friends and family, but did not by any means reach all of the intended beneficiaries, or that the cards proved to be ineffective in accessing care.)

From the survey data, it was notable that the creation of groups and group support (an example of intangible benefits) and the provision of new sources of income (leading to increased savings and locally-administered funds – an example of tangible benefits) were tied to an increased sense of security, with variation across case studies, e.g., through self-reliance/self-help groups, producer groups, saving groups and other group formations. Overall, the survey data suggested that health concerns as well as income generation concerns (e.g., tied to worries about future prices for products produced) were key worries of the women interviewed, along with many other potential risks such as theft and drug use in the family or community. As expected, this depends very much on the local context, but again we find that health and income are usually key concerns for low-income women and their families, and that they are often intimately connected. The survey data also highlighted the fact that low-income women and their families very often do not have access to basic low-cost health care, which is obviously a primary concern. These risks and worries can be further disaggregated in the future so that recommendations can be made for specific types of low-income women (i.e., based on occupation, age, natural and social environment, rural or urban residence, living close to commercial centers or in remote areas, and other considerations).

The greatest sources of security were very country and context-specific; for example, the Lao survey data indicate that these are the saving group, the women's union, the village development fund, and in some cases the village welfare association. On the basis of the qualitative and survey data, we would argue that the development of a 'multi-layered' form of provision of social protection, from individuals and families through groups (including community-based and traditional forms of provision of security, as well as newer saving groups, producer groups, and others); through organizations and networks such as women's unions and membership-based networks, (I)NGO and government-provided programs; and other complementary forms of social protection will provide the greatest benefits to vulnerable populations. The women and their family clearly turn to their families and friends first, but they also depend on traditional sources of security along with newer forms of provision of social protection at various levels of 'formality'. We have found that the different layers will need to be complementary to one another and work together to address the women's and their families' most pressing needs and concerns in order to be effective.

There are interesting differences across countries and even within countries. For example, in Lao PDR the participation of both men and women in a project may in some cases produce negative results, whereas in Viet Nam the participation of both women and men in the same project had clearly positive results. We will again need to explore this in more detail, comparing with qualitative results, to understand when and why this might be the case. In addition, we plan to analyze gender-awareness trainings in more detail, since these were reported in the survey results to have been generally quite beneficial in helping women work out potential conflicts, helping to reduce gender-based violence, and helping to balance household responsibilities. Women were very interested in men being included in the trainings (e.g., 99% of the

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[2] A number of notable studies of gender and social protection have emerged in recent years. Apart from books and articles by Naila Kabeer and other authors, members of our team also drew on such sources as Rebecca Holmes and Nicola Jones, *Gender and Social Protection in the Developing World: Beyond Mothers and Safety Nets*, London: Zed Books, 14 March 2013.

women surveyed in Cambodia supported this idea), and thought that the men would also want to be included. However, from the qualitative data we know that the impact of gender trainings varied greatly, depending on how they were done, how frequently they were conducted, and other considerations. We will focus on this as well as we continue our analyses and combine the survey and qualitative data more comprehensively and systematically in the coming months.

Based on these further analyses, we will be able to come up with more definitive and specific recommendations to inform the process of designing projects and initiatives to benefit low-income women and their families and communities. We will also be directing our attention to the crucial question of sustainability of benefits in the months and years that follow the conclusion of these projects and activities.

Sustainability

Before starting this study, we had heard of notable cases where empowerment and security projects, including income-generation projects, had apparently been successful, but as soon as the project ended and funding stopped the benefits disappeared and neither empowerment nor security were sustainable (e.g., women were made to stop participating in public events after the project ended, or men took over the economic activities and the activities later ended). In fact, in our study as well we found that, in all-too-many cases, the benefits achieved from both projects from several years ago and current projects were entirely unsustainable because of many factors – e.g., the lack of support from husbands or the women themselves; divisions or ill-feelings created by the project or activity; and a general lack of planning for the long-run.

We found that one of the keys to **sustainability** involves a careful transfer of knowledge and flexibility in using that knowledge (since the world keeps changing). A good example of the *lack* of sustainable empowerment or security comes from a livelihood and savings project in Cambodia that ended as soon as the implementers left because the recipients did not have the basic accounting, marketing or other skills and knowledge needed to keep the livelihood and savings-related activities going without outside help. The complete reliance of very poor women on one buyer, in an area affected by environmental pollution in Vietnam, also made it clear that sustainability is a crucial concern particularly where other livelihoods are not viable options. In contrast, the veterinary knowledge (e.g., in pig raising in several cases), health knowledge (of the PLHIV in Myanmar), and knowledge and ability to change patterns and materials and explore new markets ensured their sustainability in some but not all cases in all four countries. More will be said about this crucial issue of sustainability, as well as about our key concerns regarding empowerment and security/social protection, in reports and publications to follow.

What is the research's main contribution?

The contribution of this research is at different levels, but spans both conceptual and practical issues. Development work is often based on concepts and notions that have been developed out of theoretical frameworks and/or shaped by interventions. Many of those notions are often the results of research done in the West or an outcome of a theoretical baggage that has been developed in that context and history. Practice and field work often requires a rethinking of those concepts. We believe that this research has important contributions to make in terms of informing our conceptual tools, and in this case both the concept of empowerment and security, and the research that derives or depends on that conceptual underpinning. This in turn should lead us to rethink our intervention, approaches and tools used in the field of gender and development by practitioners and policy makers.

This study has shown that the concept of empowerment should not be rejected or seen as a failure, as many have suggested. However, it does point to several issues that should be addressed, including to inform interventions. One is that context is key, and that predetermined notions of empowerment and

security may fail if they do not address women's main needs and concerns in a specific context, or the social environment in which they live. Empowerment in the four countries in our study is strongly understood as a collective goal, that one is empowered when others we care for are also empowered in the process. The importance of contributing, not out of duty but out of helping and accomplishing, is as important as its reflection, the respect and recognition one gains from others, and how that facilitates empowerment. That raises serious questions in terms of empowerment activities that are primarily designed to foster autonomy and independence. Such autonomy is not rejected by our research; being independent remains important if a woman needs to leave an abusive husband, for instance. But a focus on autonomy means we are missing how empowerment works, is enjoyed or experienced, in most cases, in a very strong social setting. The same is true with regard to security. We found that the most effective solutions to insecurities are found at the community and family levels. Those traditional forms of social protection should therefore not be replaced but supported by and complemented with more formal or institutions forms. The importance of health to security is of course true anywhere but our study showed that in many parts of the Mekong, fears related to health are pervasive and often most consequential to an overall sense of security. The connection between empowerment and security becomes obvious when healthcare is seen as too expensive and the lack of resources to address poor health create fears while undermining empowerment efforts.

Another area where the research findings were clear, and where practice is behind, is the part that men play or can play regarding the empowerment of women in their lives. The data indicate clearly in the four countries that empowerment is difficult to achieve with men's opposition or reluctance, especially in more conservative settings. The most successful cases of empowerment were often those in projects where men were involved in some way. At the minimum men can be informed, or trained to understand gender issues. In some contexts men can also participate more actively in empowerment efforts or provide complementary inputs. In those cases, what we see is a change in men's behavior, not always but in many cases, where they more readily accept change in gender roles, and specifically regarding the division of household responsibilities. Men can contribute to an environment of insecurity. but when consulted or involved, it is more likely that conflict and tension will diminish with a woman's additional income.

Finally, the research suggests that all of these positive changes are often short-lived if conditions are not supported to make them last. This means that income generation activities that aim to empower should find ways to make their activities last after a project ends by providing the right skills and knowledge, by creating leadership, by fostering group formation and community organization, or ensuring lasting opportunities including market accessibility and demand for products in income generation schemes.

Regarding the crucial question of sustainability, then, based on our case studies in all four countries we can outline a few general recommendations regarding the sustainability of benefits once a sense of empowerment and security is achieved, in order to give an indication or where the research on sustainability is going:
- We find that projects and initiatives will only be sustainable, with local women and men committed to the project or activities, if the projects/activities respond to the local women's and men's perceived needs and priorities.
- We find that empowerment and security should not be aimed simply at individuals and their immediate families; instead, we need to focus on creating a secure and supportive environment (families, groups, communities, society as a whole) so the 'seeds' of empowerment and security can grow rather than disappear over time with the end of funding and direct support.
- It is crucially important to understand local gender hierarchies, ethnic hierarchies, and other potential areas of conflict within the household, within the group, within the village, and between communities in order to avoid conflicts that lead to a quick end to these benefits tied to empowerment and security.
- Local men and leaders, as well as the women themselves, will need to be 'on board', and vocational, gender-awareness and other trainings will need to be directed at men, as well as at groups and at

communities as a whole, to achieve this type of supportive environment. (Depending on local conditions, needs and attitudes, projects may therefore need to be directed not only at women, but also at men, whether included in the same projects with women or separately; the men's non-inclusion can be a major source of conflict and resentment, including toward 'international projects that focus only on women'.)

- These projects will need careful follow-ups (and one should not assume that the benefits gained will continue on – sustainability is a crucial issue that is generally not addressed).
- It will be very useful in many contexts to have groups and networks and the support of women's (and other) organizations, unions and other institutions that can aid in the sustainability of the benefits achieved in these projects.
- Complementary projects, including in succession, in very low-income communities will help benefits become sustainable over time.
- The transfer of knowledge, skills and abilities that include flexibility in the face of change are fundamental for sustainability in an ever-changing world.

These findings have therefore both conceptual and practical implications. We are still at the beginning of our analysis considering the enormous amount of data we have collected. We plan to further analyze those findings in the coming months, to disseminate them in policy fora and academic venues, and publish the findings so they reach a larger audience, and thus we will report more on the research in the final C&E Report due at the end of June.

[Afterward to the Research Brief: An additional note regarding the use of Quick Tap Survey]

As we planned to conduct close to 1400 survey interviews, using a long questionnaire, we assessed early on whether the use of a paper-based or tablet-based platform would be less expensive and provide faster results for the project. A 2014 study comparing both data collection methods in the context of conservation projects stated, 'the cost per completed interview for the tablet-based survey was 74% less than the paper-based survey average, and the average time per interview question for the tablet-based survey was 46% less than the paper-based survey average'.[3] Based on the scope of the work, and promising development with regard to digital platforms, we decided to opt for a tablet-based survey using an application called Quick Tap Survey (QTS)[4] and we purchased a number of tablets (pre-approved by Australian Aid). The main advantage of QTS compared with other applications was that the survey could be conducted offline (important for remote areas) and the data synced later with a Wi-Fi connection. In the end, there were both negative and positive impacts of using a tablet-based survey. The negative points mostly concern the design of the survey, which requires careful understanding of skip logic. Our survey was also so large that the application could not support single screen questions (our screen would show a list of several questions rather than one) and would crash, requiring further changes. There were also many errors occurring during the data collection where the QTS app in some tablets would crash, or present a random bug, creating further delays and requiring a synchronous paper copy, or switching to paper altogether in some cases. A final issue is that the data needed to be cleaned and translated back into English, which could not be done automatically (we had to have the four country teams translate the data). This explains to some extent why the design of the survey and the data collection phase took longer than expected (even though an individual survey interview would be faster using a tablet-based method if there weren't any crashes or problems). The main advantages, besides reduced costs (since there is no data entry), appeared at the very end of the project when data analysis started. All data were automatically uploaded to the database and were instantly usable in Excel or SPSS/Stata format (after data cleaning). This helped in generating quick graphs and the quantitative analysis needed to support the qualitative data collected during the first phase in order to present the findings in policy fora, which quickly followed the survey since we were close to the end of the project. Although there were delays, we would argue that completing the survey as planned (meeting our targets in four countries, while managing permissions, and all the unexpected issues we faced conducting data collection in remote and hard to reach areas) was an achievement in itself, as we were never entirely certain it could be accomplished. We would therefore suggest that future projects consider trying tablet-based surveys for large samples using a smaller questionnaire, but to examine other applications that may present fewer bugs and crashes than QTS. For smaller surveys, a paper-based approach might be better.

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[3] Craig Leisher, A Comparison of Tablet-Based and Paper-Based Survey Data Collection in Conservation Projects, *Soc. Sci.* 2014, 3, 264–271; doi:10.3390/socsci3020264, page 264.

[4] QTS is both an internet based dashboard where the PI (project investigator) can manage and organize the survey data, and a tablet application that allows each tablet to record and store survey answers. Those answers were automatically downloaded by the PI and removed from all tablets and QTS servers when the survey ended.