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Internal Mid-term Reflection for SOLAR Project

Approach and methodology

The internal mid-term reflection of the SOLAR Project provided a platform for the project team and partners to reflect on the relevance and impacts of the project activities so far; review progress against the project objectives and work plan; assess the partnerships and third-party grants; and discuss the challenges, lessons, and possible adaptations for the second year of implementation. The reflection followed a participatory approach to allow for building trust among partners. It was held during the Provincial Working Group (PWG) meeting on 8 June 2023 and the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting on 20 June 2023 through online surveys as well as plenary and group discussions. The current report summarizes the results of the mid-term reflection survey and discussions.

Objectives

- To jointly reflect on the relevance and interim impacts and review the progress against project objectives and expected results
- To highlight the main problems and challenges faced by partners, especially at the district and village levels
- To document strengths, weaknesses, emerging opportunities and threats, good and bad practices, and identify lessons to further adapt and improve the project implementation
- To reflect on the management, coordination, administration of contracts, and reporting arrangements and necessary changes, if any
- To identify key areas that require support or action from other project partners and identify opportunities for collaboration and expansion
- To share and adapt workplans for the next year and take decisions on the way ahead

Key findings

- It is important to allow farmers to become members of NSSF through their established producer groups or facilitated by group leaders and village chiefs who are close to the people, knowledgeable about their circumstances and therefore more effective in facilitating their access. ILO and Oxfam are continuously advocating to LSSO to consider creating a new scheme for cooperatives, worker groups, and producer groups to register in the NSSF—as many developing countries in ASEAN and worldwide have done.
- The project should partner more with provincial and district authorities for implementation rather than the central level. This can help to reach farmers more frequently and effectively and strengthen



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local capacities. It is also necessary to organise clearer, better tailored, and more frequent communication and advocacy campaigns. The project team considers these recommendations vital and will plan for direct contracting with local authorities, such as the provincial social security offices, in the second year of implementation. At the same time, the project will retain the engagement with central authorities to ensure transparency and facilitate reporting under the internal government procedures.

- The project can explore the possibility of using village savings funds as a potential source for paying NSSF contributions, by working with village leaders and households.
- The project can explore the possibility of training farmers on coffee and tea processing and marketing by modern and more efficient methods to allow them to have higher and more stable incomes, thereby also increasing their capacity to enrol in social security. While training on processing and marketing are not under the scope of the SOLAR Project, the project team will explore opportunities to collaborate more with other projects in the coffee and tea sectors to try to ensure that such trainings benefit SOLAR beneficiaries. An overall lesson is to explore additional partnerships to link producer groups, associations, and cooperatives with business-related training and access to markets, such that the project team can offer a comprehensive package of support, with information and training on worker rights on one hand and knowledge and training on improving business and incomes on the others. Such an integrated package can in turn greatly help to promote labour rights.
- The first year of implementation allowed a variety of stakeholders to build partnerships and pilot-test approaches to improving social security, OSH, collective bargaining and gender rights for farmers, in order to find a working model for the project activities. Though this would nevertheless need continuous update, the start-up work needs to continue in the medium term to allow the partnerships to take fruit and see meaningful results and impacts on people. The involvement of farmers, group leaders, and village authorities in the project activities has helped to build a base, from which to continue promoting labour rights in the long run. It is important to provide continuous capacity building to local organisations (provincial, district and village authorities as well as CSOs) in the medium term and to ensure that they have sufficient funds to implement activities, which in turn can strengthen their capacities further and contribute to their long-term sustainability.



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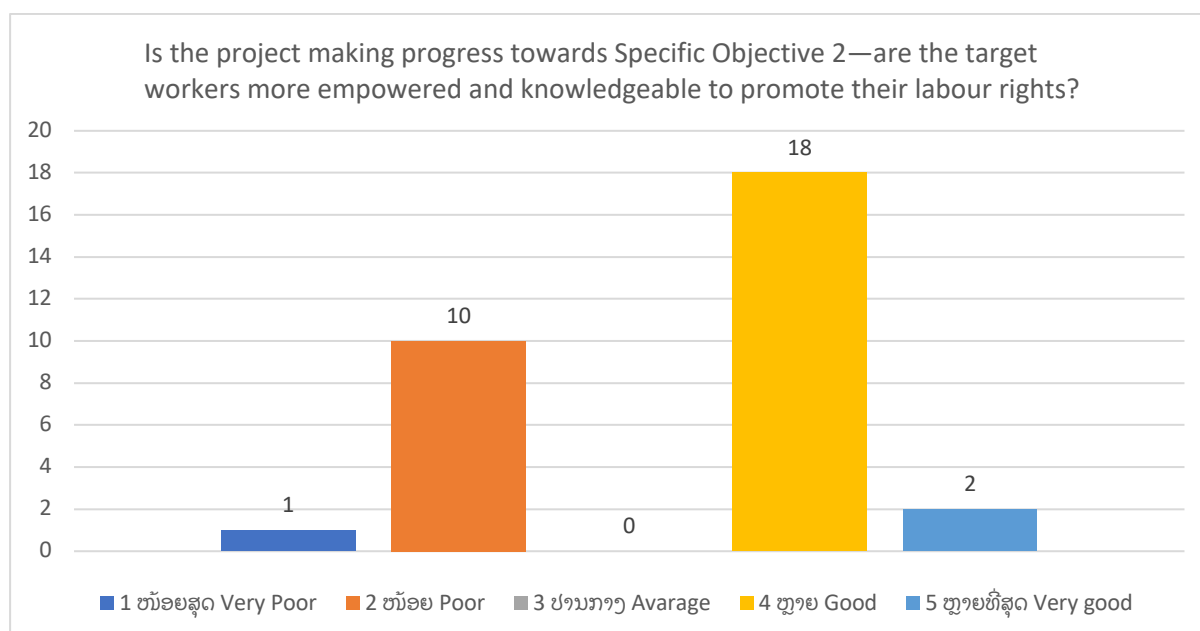
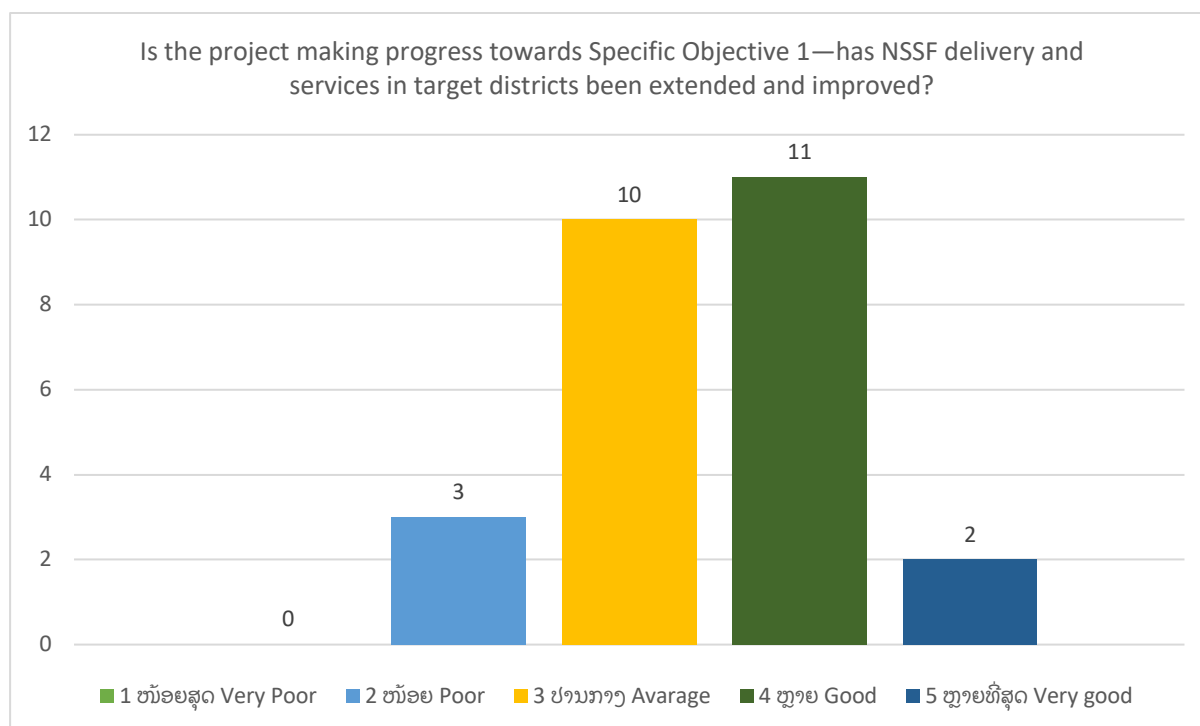


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Detailed results of the mid-term reflection survey



The primary examples illustrating progress towards the Specific Objectives are increase in the number of NSSF insured persons and greater interest in and understanding of the NSSF and OSH measures shown by farmers during the trainings and advocacy campaigns. Other key examples illustrating the progress include establishment of new producer groups; good collaboration with target famer groups and cooperatives; improved coordination between stakeholders in implementing the project; and follow-up actions by farmers



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from what they learnt during the trainings in the form of using protective equipment and handling machines and tools more carefully.

The **enabling factors for making progress towards the Specific Objectives** are strong collaboration amongst project stakeholders from both central and local levels and multi-stakeholder partnerships; dissemination of the benefits of joining NSSF clearly, innovatively and in a tailored way in local areas, including using the CSO networks; and funds made available to the partner organisations for hiring staff and conducting activities, especially at the local levels. Other enabling factors are the economic circumstances of households—such as when farmers earn well from selling or exporting coffee and have high disposable incomes; continuous engagement with partners and target beneficiaries; joint consultations on challenges and finding solutions together; alignment of the project with government policy and institutional work plans; good ownership by project stakeholders; focus on farmers and involvement of farmers and village chiefs in the activity implementation; and close and timely support from SOLAR project team such as through TOTs and clear planning.

The **limiting factors restricting progress towards the Specific Objectives** are the still low understanding of social security among villagers and relatively low enrolment in NSSF; low and unstable incomes of farmers; limited LSSO services at the local level; limited funds for project partners to implement activities; and difficulty in accessing target villages during harvesting time as well as due to poor road conditions in remote areas. Other limiting factors are structural issues related to the National Health Insurance scheme, leading to poor quality of healthcare services; difficulty of some partners and many farmers in understanding the concept of social security; low acceptance of women as leaders; difficulty in reaching the same farmers in repeat trainings to allow for continuous knowledge transfer and advocacy, due to their busy schedules; low capacity, especially at local levels; and a centralised government structure and bureaucracy not allowing local authorities to implement activities independently.

The **limiting factors can be addressed** by conducting dissemination and awareness raising meetings on NSSF and OSH continuously, clearly and innovatively; piloting initiatives such as the mobile LSSO service for villagers; increasing fund allocation to local implementing partners so that they can hire staff and conduct more activities; building capacity of local partners including village authorities on technical topics to increase their ownership of NSSF campaigns and OSH trainings; and promoting coffee and tea products commercially to increase household incomes. Other steps to be taken or considered are frequent monitoring and encouragement; more support or pressure from the government and development partners; financial support to village authorities for them to implement concrete actions related to social security and OSH; engaging District Labour and Social Welfare offices where local social security services are not available; stipulating conditions related to minimum participation of women in activities; integrating gender rights into each activity; and most importantly, continuously engaging and looking for solutions in a collaborative way.

Lessons learned on changes and improvements needed are to focus more on producer group members while designing activities; have more prior engagement with village authorities; provide longer trainings to implementing partners on technical topics as well as on fund and project management; continuously monitor and evaluate current activities to improve their implementation in future; and conduct trainings and advocacy campaigns in a tailored way and more frequently to reach a larger number of villagers, especially those of working age. It is also useful to closely follow-up with villagers after NSSF advocacy campaigns are conducted,



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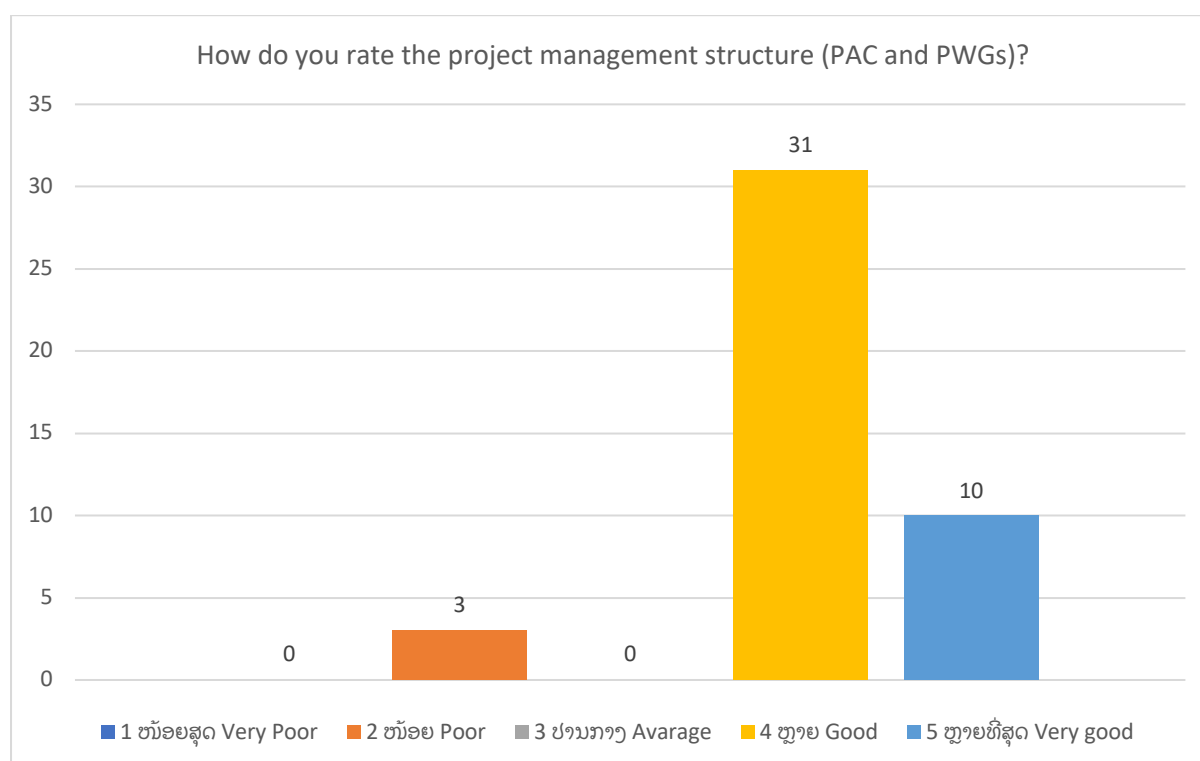
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over a longer period of time and through village authorities, in order to encourage them to register and claim benefits effectively. Farmers' collective bargaining skills can also be improved through activities conducted jointly with Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, LFTU, and LNCCI. A key point raised by many partners was to showcase insured farmers who benefitted from NSSF to other households in the target areas as well as in new areas—by expanding the project—to allow people to see first-hand how having good labour conditions are beneficial.

Partners highlighted some **key impacts of the SOLAR Project on target beneficiaries so far** such as some farmers—both women and men—became members of producer groups and associations officially; two groups selected women as their group leaders; and an increase in registration under the voluntary NSSF scheme. Mainly, partners observed greater interest in joining the NSSF compared to earlier as well as higher awareness and understanding of labour rights and social security among farmers—especially acknowledging that they have the right to income security in cases of ill health, sickness or death, which can help to reduce the burden on their children. They also acknowledged the importance of OSH provisions and displayed better knowledge of using coffee and tea producing and processing equipment safely.





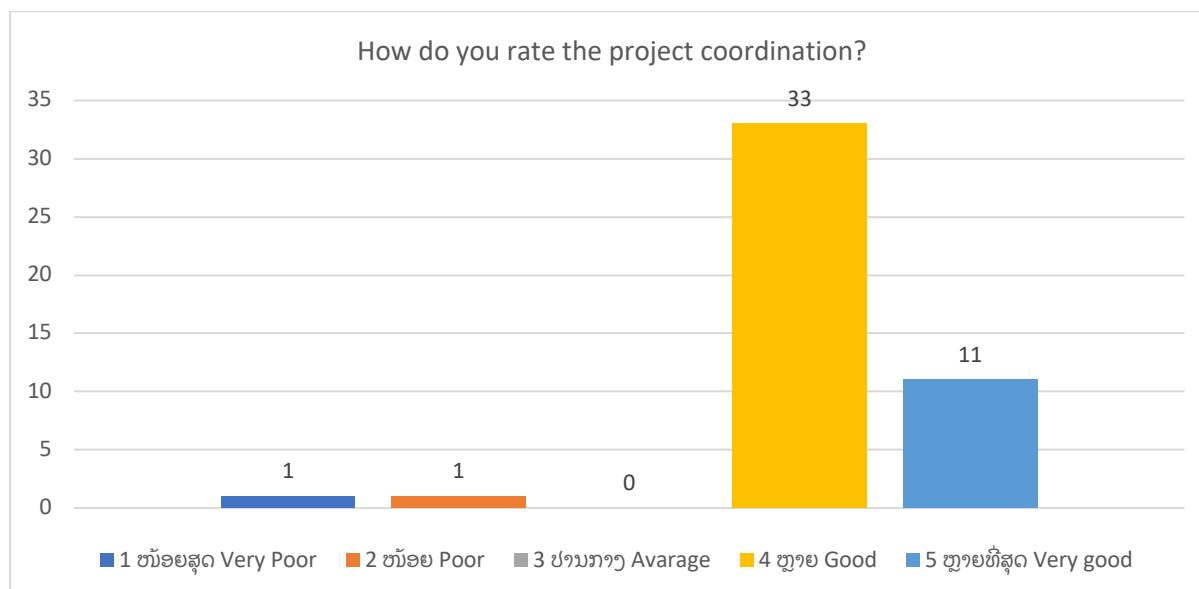
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The **project's technical and administrative support** was assessed by 52% of respondents to be on time and 7% to be somewhat on time. Around 45% of respondents replied that there were delays as activities could not be completed before the harvesting season (October to February every year). Others highlighted complexity of administrative processes and lack of equipment in local areas hindering implementation.

The majority of respondents stated that there is no **duplication of efforts between project partners**, as each organisation or sector has its own clear plan, expertise, and responsibilities. Yet, some highlighted that more activities could be done while one respondent mentioned the need to consolidate with other similar projects. In terms of **collaboration with project partners or non-project partners**, respondents were almost equally divided on the need to include more partners and not. Those who wished to work with new partners stated that these could be the Ministry of Industry and Commerce and its local offices, enterprises and buyers, Ministry of Health, Lao Women's Union, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (for UXO clearance). Some respondents stated that the project could work more with producer group leaders, village authorities, projects in the coffee and tea sectors, as well as with the National Assembly.

The **project's reporting arrangements** were assessed by 77% of respondents as being clear and easy to follow. Of these, 2 respondents stated that the achievements were not easy to monitor, which shows that the project team should disseminate the regular reports to partners more. The remaining 23% of respondents said that the reporting arrangements are confusing and needs improvement. Around 56% of overall respondents said that they need close support to be able to adhere to the reporting arrangements, while 26% said that they can do it by themselves. Partners also gave the feedback that the quarterly reports should be shared with the PWGs and PAC on a regular basis—in soft copy. In terms of **collecting data for the logframe indicators**, 67% of respondents stated that they have a good understanding of the indicators and how to collect the data, 6% had no understanding, and 27% had a partial understanding. This indicates that the project team should work more closely and continuously with partners to share the previous reports and collect and monitor indicator data.



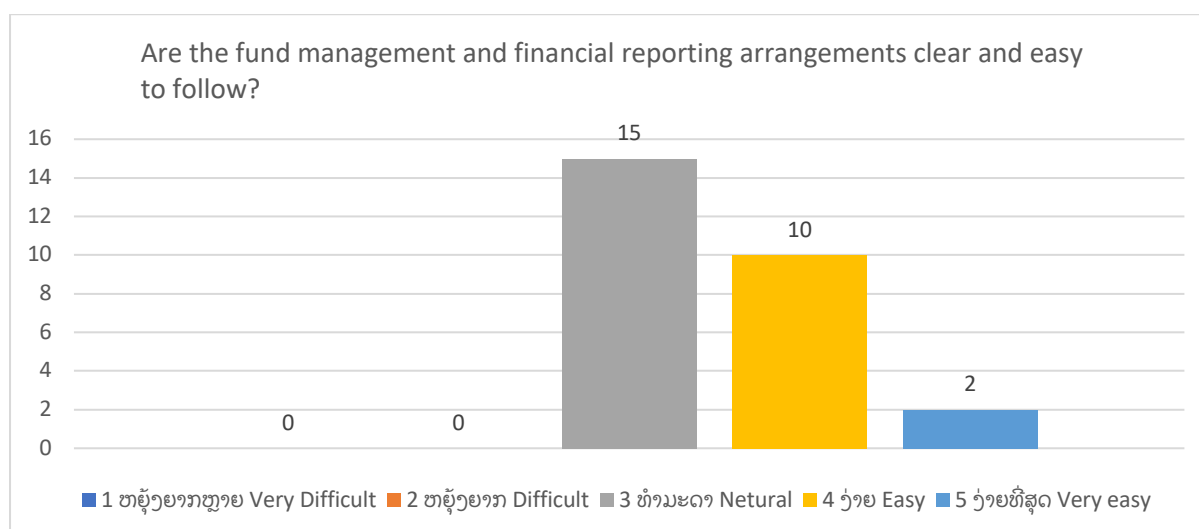
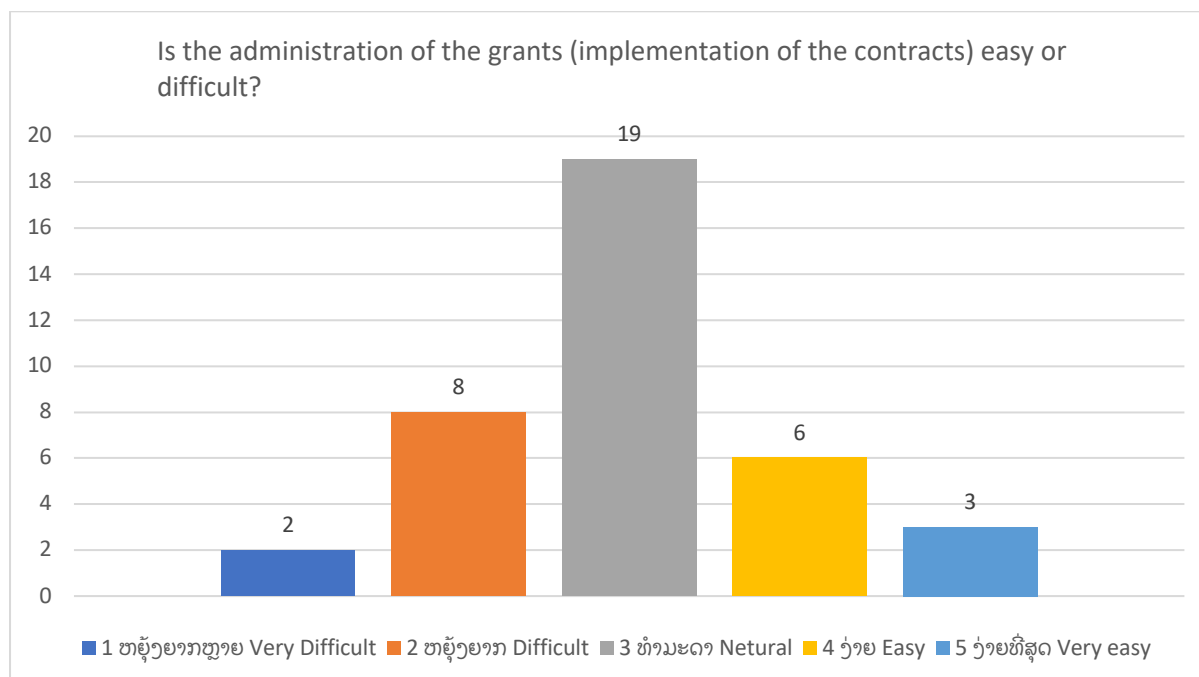
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The survey questions on **administration of the third-party grants, fund management, and financial reporting arrangements** show that implementing partners find it of average ease/difficulty level to administer the third-party grants, with respondents almost equally divided—26% replied very difficult or difficult, 50% replied neutral, and 24% replied easy or very easy. On the other hand, implementing partners find it easier to manage the funds and follow the financial reporting arrangements—56% replied neutral, and 44% replied easy or very easy. It is assumed that partners who have worked with ILO and Oxfam several times in the past would find it easier to adhere to the fund management and reporting processes. The results may also indicate that management, planning, and coordination is often more difficult than reporting. This is supported by 86% of respondents saying that they **need more support and training on how to use the grants**.

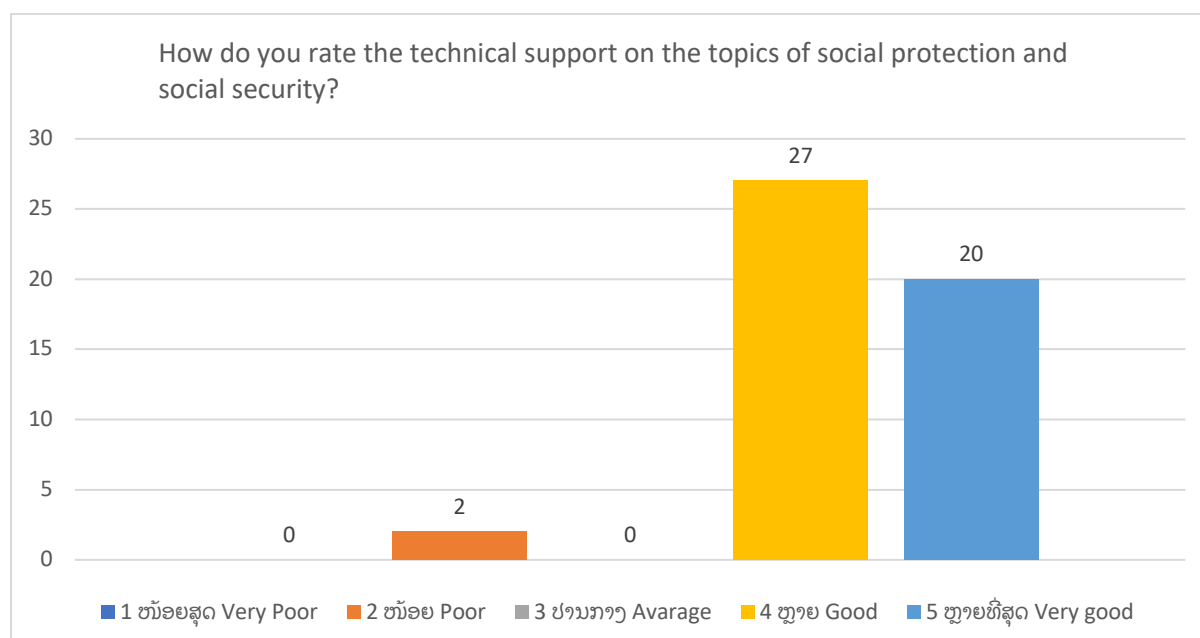


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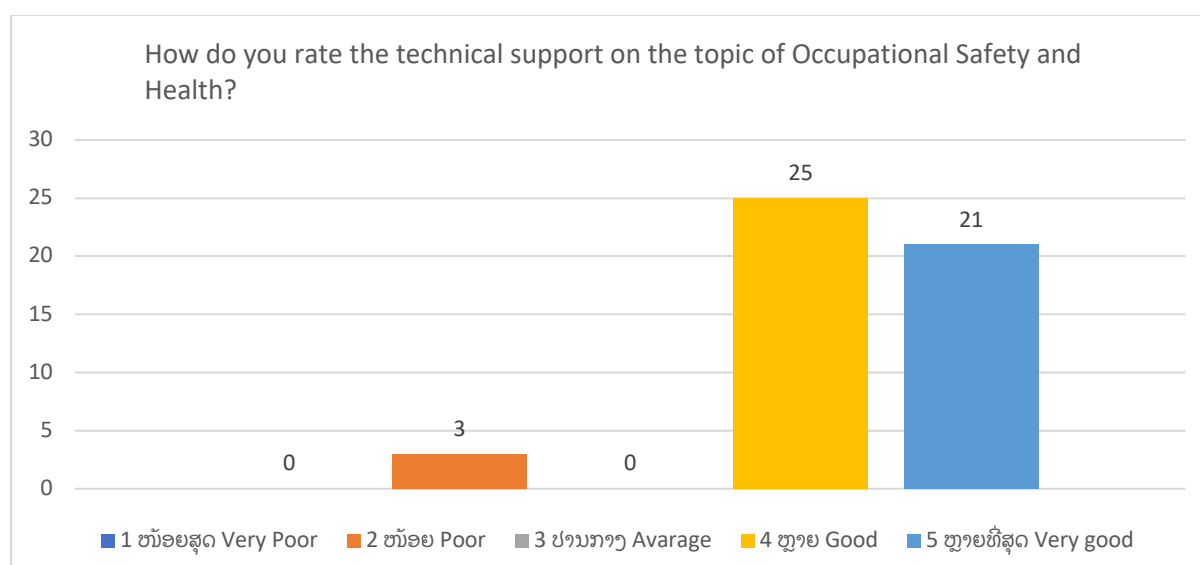


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The **technical support on the topic of social protection** was assessed by 96% of respondents to be good or very good. Around 48% of respondents stated that they need more and continuous support, while 28% do not need any further support and 19% asked for more dissemination about the NSSF in villages.



The **technical support on the topic of OSH** was assessed by 94% of respondents to be good or very good. Around 82% of respondents stated that they have a better understanding of OSH risks, problems, and preventive measures now, while 11% indicated a partially better understanding, and 5% indicated no change. Around 78% of respondents stated that they need more and continuous support, while 22% do not need any further support. Those who asked for more support identified specific areas such as how to administer first aid, use protective clothing for chemical use, and enforce the application of OSH measures and use of protective equipment. They also asked for conducting more OSH trainings in the target villages, covering at least half the total population and following up with trainees afterwards to assess the application.





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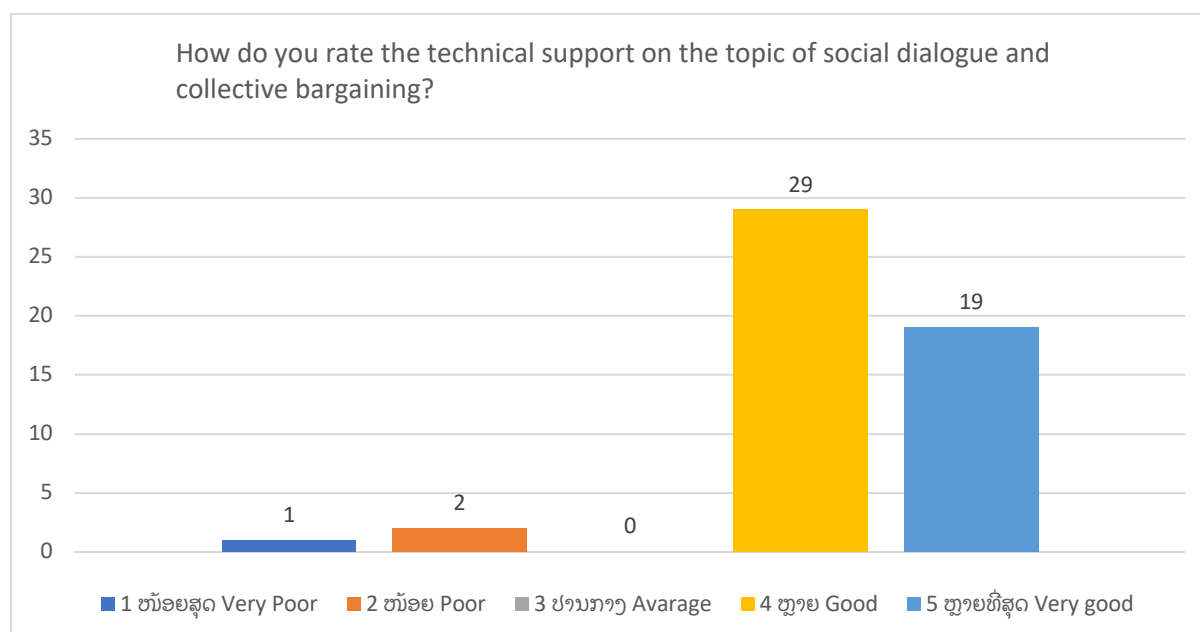


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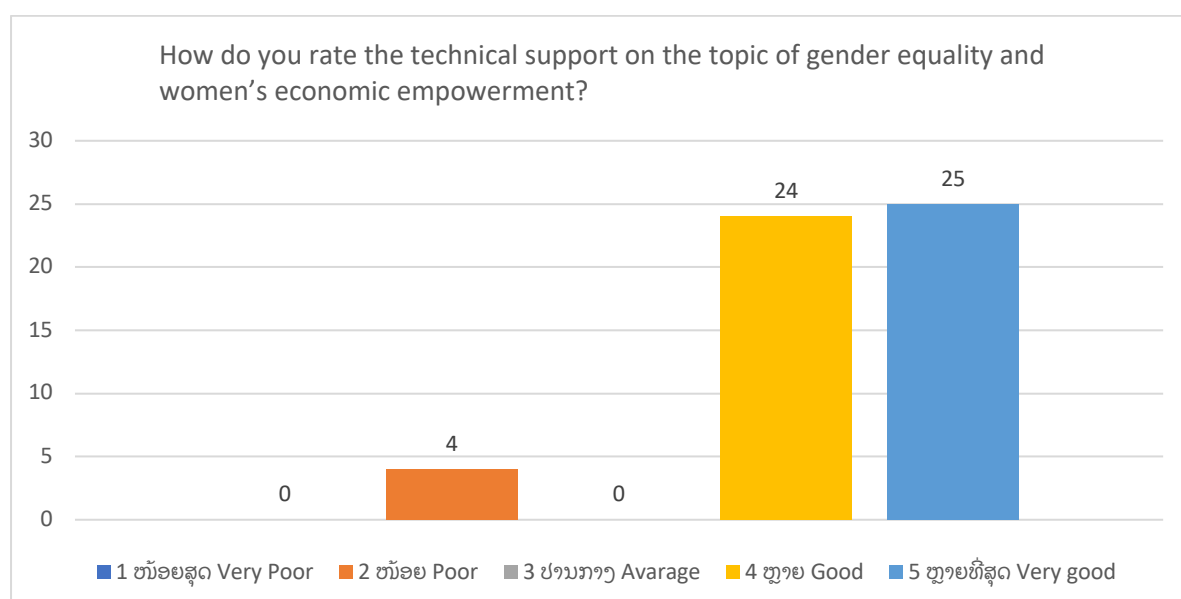


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The technical support on the topic of social dialogue and collective bargaining was assessed by 94% of respondents to be good or very good. Around 77% of respondents stated that they need more training and support on application of collective bargaining skills, while 17% do not need further support.



The technical support on the topic of gender equality and women's economic empowerment was assessed by 92% of respondents to be good or very good. Around 75% of respondents stated that they need more training, while 10% do not need further support. Those who asked for more training identified specific areas such as how to increase women's skills in order to participate in economic activities, take leadership positions, and manage finances. They also asked for support to creating opportunities for women to take decisions on family matters, balancing roles and responsibilities between men and women, and encouraging women in the model households in target villages to serve as inspiration to others.





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Partners highlighted some **additional areas related to labour rights** where they need support. These mainly include provisions of the Labour Law; negotiation and worker relations to allow farmers to have fair incomes and access benefits; employment promotion; and protection of Lao migrant workers abroad.

In terms of **legal or policy obstacles that make implementation challenging**, the biggest group of respondents did not find any obstacles. Others highlighted that the contents of some articles in the laws are very general and not sufficiently precise to allow for correct interpretation and application, while some others mentioned that there are inconsistencies between the articles in the law. Many respondents felt that there is low awareness of the legal provisions among project stakeholders, as the articles are complex and difficult to understand. This indicates a need to increase awareness and understanding of the Labour Law, Social Security Law and other relevant laws, so that implementing partners can conduct training and advocacy campaigns effectively. Another key feedback was that some provisions in the law do not reflect the real situation of informal workers and rural dwellers, such as the NSSF contribution rate of 9% which can be too high for many informal workers, even based on the minimum wage.

The **emerging opportunities related to the SOLAR Project** are that it provides a solid, multi-stakeholder mechanism for different partners to collaborate on improving labour rights in Lao PDR, enforcing legal provisions through a targeted and pilot-test approach, and transitioning from informal to formal work. It brings together the government (central and local authorities) and civil society, as well as policy and implementation to benefit farmers and improve their access to social security and labour rights. It focuses on establishing collective mechanisms for informal workers (in the form of producer groups) and managing them effectively, which can ultimately lead to better incomes and working conditions in villages. Trainings on OSH and use of personal protective equipment can provide better working and living conditions. Responses mentioned that the project “provided opportunities and protection to farmers” by “working directly with them” and allowing them to “have real benefits”.

The survey explored several ways to **ensure sustainability of SOLAR activities beyond the project duration**, primarily by continuing the implementation of the project if possible; gradually integrating the activities into the government’s routine work, especially provincial and district authorities; strengthening local capacity so as to allow local partners and CSOs to continue implementing by themselves if they have funds; and forming more worker groups and utilising the village funds or group funds. The partners felt that the involvement of farmers, group leaders, women, and village authorities in the project activities so far has helped to build a good base, from which to continue promoting labour rights in the long term. A key factor is to provide continuous capacity building to local organisations (provincial, district and village authorities as well as CSOs) in the medium term and to ensure that they have sufficient funds to implement activities, which in turn can strengthen their capacities further and contribute to their long-term sustainability.

Partners stressed on their **needs and priorities for further resources** in the form of: firstly, more financial support in the medium term, which would allow them to have more human resources and vehicles for transportation and thus, conduct more activities; and secondly, TOTs and capacity building for local implementers in technical areas as well as project management and M&E. They also identified other needs and priorities such as forming new producer groups; engaging women in activities and following up more closely with them; continuous training and advocacy on OSH and NSSF and following up to ensure application; building capacity of a bigger network of local OSH trainers and NSSF promoters and funding them directly;



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improving access to markets and quality of coffee and tea products; and technical training on coffee and tea processing for getting better prices from buyers.

List of survey questions

Progress and impact

1. Is the project making progress towards Specific Objective 1—has NSSF delivery and services in target districts been extended and improved? Rate from 1 to 5.
2. Is the project making progress towards Specific Objective 2—are the target workers more empowered and knowledgeable to promote their labour rights? Rate from 1 to 5.
3. Can you give some examples to illustrate how you have made the progress?
4. What are the enabling factors for progress towards the project's objectives?
5. What are the limiting factors?
6. How can the limiting factors be addressed, or what changes are needed?
7. Have you seen any impacts of the project on people? Please describe.

Management and coordination

8. How do you rate the project management structure (PAC and PWGs)? Rate from 1 to 5.
9. How do you rate the project coordination? Rate from 1 to 5.
10. What changes or improvements are needed, if any?
11. Do you receive technical and administrative support on time?
12. Do you feel there is duplication of efforts between project partners? If yes, please give examples.
13. Do you feel there is need for more collaboration with project partners or non-project partners? In which areas?

Reporting

14. Are the reporting arrangements clear and easy to follow?
15. Do you need additional support for reporting?
16. Do you have a good understanding of the indicators and how to collect data on them?

Management of grants and funds (only for those CSOs and organisations that received grants from Oxfam)

17. Is the administration of the grants (implementation of the contracts) easy or difficult? Rate from 1 to 5.
18. Are the fund management and financial reporting arrangements clear and easy to follow? Rate from 1 to 5.
19. Do you require any additional support or training on using the grants?



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Technical support

20. How do you rate the technical support on the topics of social protection and social security? Rate from 1 to 5.
21. Do you need more support? If yes, please explain.
22. How do you rate the technical support on the topic of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)? Rate 1 to 5.
23. Do you have a better understanding of OSH risks, problems, and preventive measures now?
24. Do you need more support? If yes, please explain.
25. How do you rate the technical support on the topic of social dialogue and collective bargaining? Rate 1 to 5.
26. Do you need more support? If yes, please explain.
27. How do you rate the technical support on the topic of gender equality and women's economic empowerment? Rate 1 to 5.
28. Do you need more support? If yes, please explain.
29. Do you need more support on any additional topic related to labour rights? If yes, please describe.

Institutional barriers and sustainability

30. Are any legal or policy obstacles in Lao laws that make implementation of the project challenging? Please explain.
31. In your view, what are the emerging opportunities related to the project?
32. How can we ensure sustainability of our activities beyond the project (after August 2024)?
33. What are your needs and priorities for further resources and financial support?

Others

34. Do you have any other feedback?



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List of participants in the survey

No.	Organisation
1.	Lao Social Security Organisation – Central
2.	Provincial Social Security Offices – Champasak, Salavan, Sekong
3.	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare – Central
4.	Departments of Labour and Social Welfare – Champasak, Salavan, Sekong
5.	Lao Federation of Trade Unions – Central
6.	Provincial Federation of Trade Unions – Champasak, Salavan, Sekong
7.	Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry – Central
8.	Provincial Governor Offices – Champasak, Salavan, Sekong
9.	District Governor Offices – Paksong, Laongam, Thateng
10.	PAC members – Central
11.	PWG members – Champasak, Salavan, Sekong
12.	ILO
13.	Oxfam
14.	Association to Support the Development of the Peasant Societies
15.	<i>Phan-Thin</i> (Seeds of Community) Social Enterprise
16.	<i>Maeying Huamjai Phattana</i> (Women Mobilizing for Development)