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## Reducing vulnerability in Lao PDR: Advancing social protection and labour rights and entitlements in the coffee and tea sectors of Lao PDR (SoLaR)

### QUICK FACTS

**Countries:** Laos

**Evaluation date:** 28 July 2024

**Evaluation type:** Project

**Evaluation timing:** Final

**Administrative Office:** RO – Asia and the Pacific

**Technical Office:** DWT -Bangkok

**Evaluation manager:** Rattaporn Pongpattana, M&E Officer from ILO ROAP

**Evaluation consultant(s):** Dwight Ordóñez (Lead) and Viriyasack Sisouphanthong

**DC Symbol:** LAO/21/01/EUR

**Donor(s) & budget:** European Union and ILO administrative office (CO for TH, Cambodia, Lao PDR);  
US\$ 1,129,841 (EURO 1 million)

*Key Words: Social Security, Occupational Safety and Health, Gender Equality, Collective Bargaining*

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

Most of the workers and households engaged in the coffee and tea sectors in Lao People's Democratic Republic are in informal and vulnerable employment, often as unpaid contributing family work. Both sectors depend on seasonal labour, with high levels of participation by women (particularly ethnic minority women in the case of tea). Both sectors demonstrate similar decent work deficits with respect to lack of social protection access and systemic OSH risks.

The project's development objective is "Workers, particularly informal workers and women, in the Lao coffee and tea sectors have improved access to social protection coverage and occupational safety and health, realizing their respective labour rights". The project's specific objectives are: SO1: Extended and improved social protection and OSH delivery system and services at district level for women and men workers in the coffee and tea sectors; SO2: Women and men workers in the coffee and tea sectors in three contiguous districts of the Bolaven Plateau of Lao PDR are organized and empowered to promote and protect their labour rights.

The key stakeholders for this action are the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU), Lao Coffee Association (LCA), the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI), the Tea Association, cooperatives, production groups, the Agriculture Research Centre, Lao Social Security Organization and its provincial and district offices, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and its provincial departments and district offices. Likewise, the three Civil Society Organizations which supported the implementation of the project.

### Present situation of the project

The Project formally ended on 14 August 2024. As per the information received from the ILO and Oxfam, the donor is considering the possibility of funding a new, second phase of the project during the following years.

### Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation

The final evaluation's **purpose** is to assure accountability and learning to the ILO constituents and key stakeholders. The findings and recommendations will be used as organizational learning to improve the design and implementation of future relevant project and programmes.



	<p>The evaluation <b>scope</b> covered project activities implemented at national, provincial, district and village levels, in Lao PDR between November 2021 and June 2024.</p> <p>The <b>clients/users</b> of the evaluation are the Government of Lao PDR’s relevant ministries (particularly, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare - MOLSW) and agencies (e.g., Lao Social Security Organization, others), employers’ organizations and sectoral associations, trade union, the ILO, CSO/NGO as Oxfam and other implementing partners, and the donor (the European Union).</p>
<p><b>Methodology of evaluation</b></p>	<p>The evaluation used a mix of evaluation approaches to ensure triangulation of information, basically: (i) a results-based approach to examine the project’s outcome achievements; (ii) mixed methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings; and (iii) a participatory approach.</p> <p>Data collection methods included an exhaustive review of documents; key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD). The evaluation data collection work was performed online and face-to-face in both Vientiane and in the three target provinces of the project.</p>
<p><b>MAIN FINDINGS &amp; CONCLUSIONS</b></p>	<p>The project has attained most of its expected outputs and it has contributed to strengthen social security and OSH delivery capacity and advance gender equality in coffee and tea producing communities in three southern provinces of Lao PDR. However, more time and efforts would be needed to consolidate and enhance these achievements and expand the impact of project interventions around the country.</p> <p>SoLaR project’s objectives and design are relevant and consistent with the needs and priorities of a variety of stakeholders. The project’s objectives are consistent with the Lao PDR National Social Protection Strategy, especially pillar 2, on extending the coverage of social security. Likewise, project objectives are consistent with the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED 2021-2025). SoLaR project’s objectives align with ILO’s Programme and Budget</p>



(2022-2023) objectives 6.2, 7.2, 8.1 and 8.2 and fit within “ILO’s III Decent Work Country Programme for Lao PDR (2022-2026)”, outcomes 2 and 4.

Regarding the validity of project design, The combination of the project specific objectives, expressed in clear outcomes and outputs, offers a solid conceptual framework and a powerful programmatic path for advancing social protection, occupational safety and health, social dialogue (through collective bargaining), economic improvement, and gender equality in the coffee and tea sector.

The project is coherent with both ILO’s other actions in the country and has coordinated some of its activities with those of other donors/ cooperation agencies.

Regarding its effectiveness, the project has been successful in achieving its expected results. According to the project’s monitoring system report, by June 2024, SoLaR had exceeded several of its direct services (e.g. men and women groups organized and empowered to promote and protect labour rights; additional workers registered with LSSO; additional people with increased understanding of NSSF, OSH, and gender issues; informal women workers who received gender-responsive technical and leadership) This appraisal is confirmed by the results of an independent endline study conducted between May-June 2024.

SoLaR did an efficient use of the funds allocated for its implementation. The allocation of funds among implementing partners was adequate. Although the outcomes of the project are ambitious, and staff workload is important, SoLaR managed to deliver most of its planned activities.

Regarding its impact, as result of SoLaR efforts, Lao PDR social security and OSH delivery systems and services have become more responsive to workers’ needs, particularly those of informal, male and female agricultural workers, and other labourers working at plantations and processing facilities in the coffee and tea sectors. The project helped advance gender equality and women empowerment in the target communities by reducing gender gaps in the access to

social security and OSH and promoting increased women' participation in leadership positions in the community.

In the absence of an exit strategy, the sustainability of project interventions seems limited. The representatives of most of the organizations participating in the project stated that in the absence of SoLaR's further financial support, it would be difficult for them to continue implementing activities, or at least, they will become less frequent, the outreach capacity of these institutions being greatly affected.

## RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

### Main recommendations

#### 1.1 Addressed to the European Union (donor)

**Recommendation 1:** Design and fund a new phase of the SoLaR project for an additional minimum period of 36 months or 48 months, including the extension of its implementation to new regions (*addressed to: European Union, ROAP; priority: High; timing: Short-term; resources: Additional funding for new phase of project*).

#### 1.2 Addressed to the ILO and Oxfam

**Recommendation 2:** Include among the priority targets of the new project phase those informal workers who do not own land and work as seasonal labour in agriculture (*addressed to: ILO and OXFAM; priority: High; timing: Short-term; resources: New project budget*)

**Recommendation 3:** Partner with other major international cooperation projects to mainstream the promotion of labour rights and gender equality within these projects' agenda (*addressed to: EU, European partner organizations, ILO and OXFAM; priority: Medium; timing: Short-term; resources: New project budget*)

**Recommendation 4:** Incorporate activities in other languages, including communication in local media, to improve outreach to ethnic minorities (*addressed to: ILO and OXFAM; priority: Medium; timing: Medium-term; resources: New project budget*)

**Recommendation 5:** Design, implement and monitor an exit strategy since the beginning of the new phase of the project (*addressed to: ILO and OXFAM; priority: High; timing: Short-term; resources: New project budget*)

	<p><b>1.3 Addressed to the Government of Lao-PDR</b></p> <p><b>Recommendation 6:</b> Provide partial or total subsidies on the cost of enrolment and contributions to social security for the poorest segments of Lao agricultural workers, and particularly, those under seasonal employment and insufficient income (<i>addressed to: MOLSW, government of Lao PDR; priority: High; timing: Medium-term; resources: Lao PDR national budget</i>).</p>
<p><b>Main lessons learned and good practices</b></p>	<p><b>Lessons Learned</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Duration of interventions: Increasing the coverage of social security systems and occupational safety and health practices is a long-term commitment that requires continuous action and investment by government agencies.</li><li>• Inclusion of seasonal workers: Special efforts/ means need to be developed to promote the registration of informal seasonal workers in social security and improve their knowledge on OSH.</li><li>• Accessibility to rural communities/ participants: It is important to organize outreach activities based on farmers schedules/ availability and on the limited accessibility to communities during the rainy season.</li><li>• Health sector engagement in delivery of services to member of social security: Villagers expressed their concern about bad quality of attention at hospitals, as well as their social security cards not being accepted by staff at small health centres and hospitals. It is important to ensure that health staff is sensitized by SSO.</li><li>• Economic empowerment: It is important to increase the capacity of farmers to enrol in social security. Increasing productivity through adequate equipment and improving access to markets helps boost income and thus supports registration in social security.</li><li>• Setting up of activities should be carried out on a more regular basis, as it takes time to organize activities and the participants may change/ new participants incorporate as beneficiaries, and some people may need to refresh the information received.</li></ul> <p><b>Good Practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The holistic approach employed by the project, which combines various relevant labour-related issues, such as access to social</li></ul>



security, occupational safety and health, and collective bargaining with advancing gender equality in the workplace and at community level.

- The integration of a wide range of stakeholders, (tripartite, CSO, communities) as implementers and beneficiaries, through training, of diverse project components, creating a framework for synergies and coordination.
- The piloting of mobile registration and payment services within the LSSO, which increased the accessibility to these services.
- A comprehensive visibility strategy, which included diverse means and topics, and helped convey, in an effective way, information on project's achievements and activities.