Report

'You must be bold enough to tell your own story': Programming to empower Viet Nam's Hmong girls

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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

BIAAG	Because I am a girl
FGD	Focus group discussion
IEC	Information, education and communication
KI	Key informant
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MRMV	My Rights, My Voice
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
DOET	Department of Education and Training
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health

Executive summary

Overview and report aims

Viet Nam has made tremendous progress towards its development goals in recent years. As the World Bank notes, it lifted nearly half of its population out of poverty in only two decades and managed to achieve a number of Millennium Development Goals early. Future progress, however, will depend on not just more growth – but whether that growth can be made to include the ethnic minorities who are falling further and further behind despite longstanding policies and programmes, including targeted infrastructure development, aimed at reducing their deprivation. Ethnic minorities currently account for more than half of Viet Nam's poor, three-fifths of its food-insecure and two-thirds of its extreme poor – but only an eighth of its population. The Hmong, who despite representing only about 1% of Viet Nam's population are one of the largest of its 53 ethnic minority groups, have the highest rate of poverty in the country. Largely confined to the mountains near Viet Nam's border with China, and primarily subsistence farmers, the poverty headcount among the Hmong is over 90% and the poverty gap is over 45 – meaning that not only are nearly all of the Hmong poor, but that they are very poor.

This report is the final part of a three-year programme of work, which has been funded by the UK's Department for International Development, on adolescent girls and the social norms that deny the achievement of gender justice in developing country contexts. In year one we began by mapping Hmong girls' intersecting capabilities, capturing the complex interplay between ethnicity, gender and poverty on girls' educational, physical, and psycho-emotional well-being and identified son-preference and filial piety as key to understanding Hmong girls' vulnerabilities. In year two we focused on the social norms shaping girls' educational opportunities and vulnerability to child marriage. Our research identified the ways in which social norms that see girls as little more than future wives and mothers – and as ultimately the property of their marital family – preclude investment in their broader capabilities. For this round of research we undertook in-depth qualitative fieldwork in Ha Giang and Lao Cai provinces and focused on communication initiatives broadly aimed at shifting the entrenched social norms that restrict the lives of Hmong girls. Seeking to identify examples of good practice, and to ascertain the external and internal programming factors contributing to good practice, we offer a variety of recommendations as to how policy and programming efforts could be enhanced.

Study sample and methodology

Drawing on an evidence review which showed that communication programmes are an effective way to challenge gender-discriminatory attitudes and practices, this assessment adopts a social norms lens to explore the ways in which selected programmes are working with adolescent girls and their communities to tackle early marriage and under-investment in girls' education. Because the Hmong are a relatively small population who are clustered in a relatively small geographic location, identifying good practice examples of communication approaches aimed at changing gender norms proved a challenging task. Only one of our three case studies, Plan's *Because I am a Girl*, is aimed squarely at our evaluation target – tackling the risk of child marriage. Of the other two, Oxfam's *My Rights, My Voice* has a different focus, while Meo Vac High School's extra-curricular/life-skills programming takes a different approach. Our evaluation included a review of programme documents, including internal assessments where possible, and an array of interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including girls, their family members, their teachers and leaders in their communities. We also interviewed programme implementers at local and national levels.

Key findings

Plan's Because I am a Girl

Part of a broader international effort to improve the lives of girls in developing countries, Plan's *Because I am a Girl* (BIAAG) launched in Ha Giang province in 2011. BIAAG recognises that Hmong girls are deeply constrained by both their gender and their age, the confluence of which leaves them effectively invisible. It aims to support girls' comprehensive development by providing safe-spaces and gender-rights education for girls, but also to develop their broader communities more generally. While Plan's efforts to build schools and water filtration systems have been universally well received, we found that in Meo Vac girls themselves have been effectively lost in the community development strategy. With only two girls' clubs, one of which was in practice restricted to less vulnerable girls, no messaging aimed at the boys who instigate child marriage, no apparent girl-focused education for parents, and little reported interface with the local power structure regarding the needs of adolescent girls, there is scope for improvement if Plan's BIAAG is to reach girls at scale. That said, for the few girls who were able to participate in BIAAG clubs, the experience appears to have been genuinely transformatory – with girls rejecting child marriage, expressing strong interest in high school and beginning to express their own needs and wants. Our key findings regarding BIAAG are:

1. Girls' clubs which encourage a participatory approach are effective and should be expanded
2. Efforts should be made to teach parents about the specific vulnerabilities that face girls;
3. Programming should also proactively target boys;
4. Direct enforcement of the law is effective;
5. Care needs to be taken to balance community infrastructure investments with communication and awareness-raising approaches.

Oxfam's My Rights, My Voice

Oxfam's *My Rights, My Voice* (MYMV) works to help marginalised children and adolescents in a variety of developing countries understand and claim their rights. Launched in Lao Cai province in 2011, and building on a decade of collaboration with the provincial level Department of Education and Training, MRMV is focused on improving Hmong children's access to quality education by empowering children to understand and express their needs, building local capacity to implement child-centred teaching, and fostering cooperation between parents and educational actors. We found that while the rights-based messaging often failed to resonate – in part because it appears to have been nearly devoid of local contextualisation, and programme slots appear to have been allocated primarily to the least vulnerable children – the child-centred methods used by MRMV are thoroughly engaging children's interest in ways that are likely to have cascading ramifications for the development of their capabilities. Participant girls were more confident, reported better communication with their parents, teachers and peers, and were more committed to completing their education. Furthermore, adults in the community felt that the programme, by developing local capacity and emphasising participation and dialogue, had altered the ethos of the community – with parents and officials working together to prioritise education. Our key findings regarding MRMV are:

1. Efforts should be made to aim programming at the nexus of gender and ethnicity;
2. Programme participants should include the most vulnerable;
3. Working with local partners is critical but requires adequate resourcing;
4. Hands-on, participatory activities that win children's hearts through play have critical spill-over effects.

Meo Vac High School's targeted programming

While we were unable to locate a third project specifically working with Hmong girls to improve their uptake of education and decrease their odds of child marriage, our third case study highlights the awareness-raising efforts of Meo Vac district's high school, which we hypothesised could have spill-over effects on child marriage risks. The high school has had a range of programming aimed at child marriage and primarily focused on teaching children about the Marriage and Family Law and the health consequences of child and consanguineous marriage, although current programming is more ad hoc than systematic. We found that while students understand the higher level messages aimed at them, they want graphic and detailed information about reproductive biology and help in managing the conflicting emotions that adolescence brings – largely so that they know how to live and study with the opposite sex without becoming distracted from their studies. We also found evidence that girls' trajectories were being positively altered by officials who helped them voice and claim their rights and that today's high school

students have tremendous potential to serve as role models for their younger peers. Our key findings regarding high school programming are:

1. Students and teachers would prefer dedicated clubs or classes to learn about sexual and reproductive health (SRH)-type issues;
2. Commune officials and teachers are well placed to help girls fight for their right to an education and their right to not marry as children;
3. Hmong high school students could be important peer-to-peer mentors;
4. Recognising boys' role in child marriage offers new programming opportunities.

Overarching conclusions

Drawing on the extensive primary research evidence base that we have developed over the past three years, we now have an in-depth understanding of the complexities of Hmong adolescent girls' lives and the ways in which the gendered social norms that influence their life trajectories are evolving unevenly over time. We note that:

- While access to and uptake of schooling has changed tremendously in a short time – and while most girls would like to attend high school – few Hmong parents are willing to consider investing in secondary education for their daughters.
- Child marriage, which is driven by a need for labour and is instigated by boys in the context of strong cultural norms and pressures to support their family, is becoming less common but is far from gone.
- Hmong families are stressed by the extreme poverty all too often born of subsistence agriculture.
- National level policies that have brought new transportation, education and health infrastructure to Hmong communities are improving lives – but not fast enough for adolescent girls. There is also inadequate attention paid to the nexus of ethnicity and gender, with limited tailored programming aimed at supporting disadvantaged ethnic minority girls.
- Local leadership and vision can have transformational effects and needs to be harnessed by broader programming efforts.
- Programming for young people needs to be built not only around local realities, but on a solid understanding of child and adolescent development specificities.

Policy and programming implications

Based on our research, the priority policy and programming entry points that we see as especially viable in terms of addressing Hmong girls' many vulnerabilities are as follows:

- Foster future-seeking in all Hmong children – not just those with the best classroom performance – through clubs that build on local realities, introducing Hmong role models and more exposure to the outside world.
- Foster future-seeking in Hmong parents by supporting them to develop non-agricultural sources of income and by relieving their time poverty so that their older children can be freed for further education.
- Make education affordable – and productive – for all Hmong families. This could include cash transfers and scholarship programmes for girls at secondary and tertiary levels.
- Ensure that Hmong children, girls in particular, are mastering the Vietnamese language early enough to get the most out of their schooling.
- Reduce child marriage by teaching girls practical strategies to protect themselves from kidnapping, by investing in programming for boys, by strengthening community messaging, and by using local Hmong power structures to enforce the law.

Introduction

1.1 The challenge of achieving inclusive growth

Viet Nam has made tremendous progress towards its development goals in recent years. As the World Bank (2012) notes, it lifted nearly half of its population out of poverty in only two decades and managed to achieve a number of Millennium Development Goals early (see Figure 1). Future progress, however, will depend on not just more growth, but whether that growth can be made to include the ethnic minorities who are falling further and further behind. Minorities currently account for more than half of Viet Nam's poor, three-fifths of its food-insecure and two-thirds of its extreme poor – but only an eighth of its population (World Bank, 2012; Baulch et al., 2012; Chi, 2011). The Hmong represent only about 1% of Viet Nam's population but are one of the larger of its 53 ethnic minority groups. Primarily subsistence farmers and largely confined to the mountains near the border with China (a region of poor soil and extremely limited water resources), the Hmong have the highest rate of poverty in the country: the poverty headcount is over 90% and the poverty gap is over 45, meaning that not only are nearly all of the Hmong poor, but that they are very poor (World Bank, 2012) (see Annex 3 for details).

Figure 5: 1999 and 2009 poverty rates
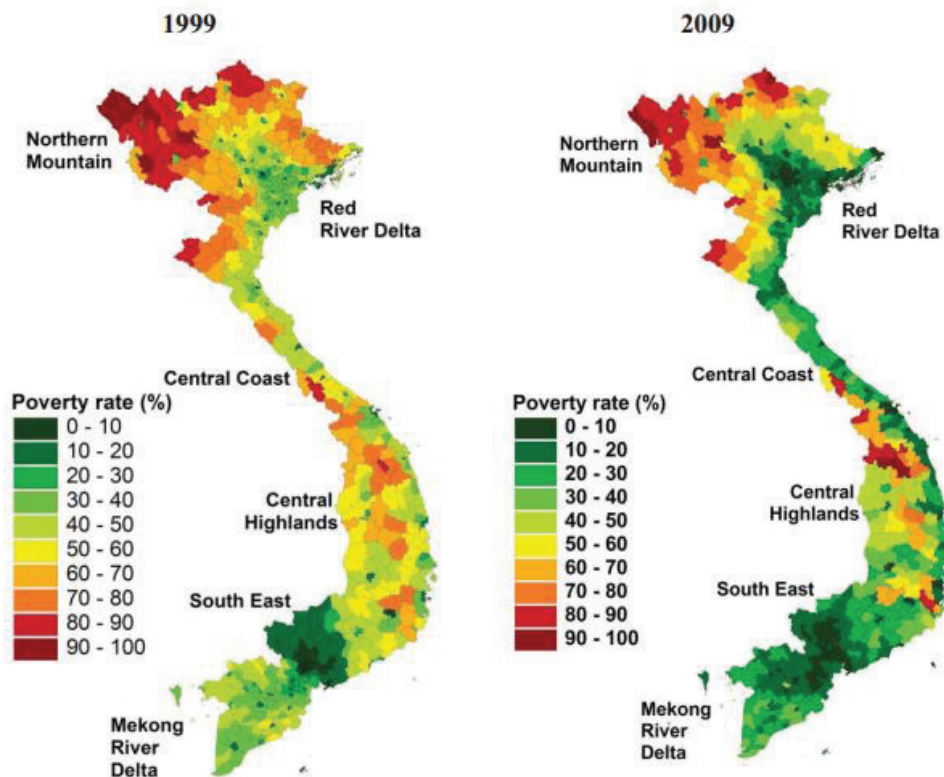
Source: World Bank (2012)

1.2 Report aims and key research questions

This report is the final part of a three-year programme of work on adolescent girls and the social norms that deny the achievement of gender justice in developing countries. In year one, we began by mapping Hmong girls' intersecting capabilities, capturing the complex interplay between ethnicity, gender and poverty on their educational, physical, and psycho-emotional well-being. Son-preference and filial piety were identified as key to understanding Hmong girls' vulnerabilities (Jones et al., 2013). In year two, we focused on the social norms shaping girls' educational opportunities and vulnerability to child marriage (Jones et al., 2014). Our research identified the ways in which social norms that see girls as little more than future wives and mothers – and as ultimately the property of their marital family – preclude investment in their broader capabilities. Only rarely allowed to attend high school, most Hmong girls are forced to spend their days working alone developing the domestic and agricultural skills they will need to become 'proper' daughters-in-law. Significantly, we also uncovered evidence that for some girls schooling may be contributing to early marriage because of the way in which it fosters physical proximity between adolescent girls and boys.

Highlighting the messy, non-linear ways in which norms change, our year-two research also found signs of progress (Jones et al., 2014). Specifically, due to the uniqueness of the Vietnamese context, wherein the government controls not only the law but social messaging, there has been a rapid recent increase in girls' educational uptake and an accompanying drop in child marriage. While it is not uncommon for girls to marry as early as 16, and some girls continued to be kidnapped for marriage against their will as young as 13, the overall consensus is that in the space of only a few years most Hmong girls are now completing ninth grade and marrying as (very) young adults.

This report, which draws on our third round of primary research, builds on what we have learned about the patterning and drivers of early marriage and under-investments in girls' education, and focuses on communication initiatives (broadly defined) that aim to shift entrenched social norms. It seeks to identify examples of good practice and to ascertain the external and internal programming factors contributing to good practice.

Informed by our understanding of girls' capability deprivations and the ways in which social norms maintain those deprivations, we present in the concluding section some recommendations on how policy and programming efforts could be improved.

1.3 Research framework and approach[1]

Recent advances in understanding the processes that drive changes in social norms in general, and gender norms in particular, indicate that both large-scale social and economic trends and smaller-scale programmatic activity can lead to change in social norms (Bicchieri, 2006; Boudet et al., 2012; Mackie and LeJeune, 2009). However, there is limited synthesised evidence of how different policies and programmes lead to changes in social norms affecting adolescent girls' capability development as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. In particular, there is little known about the effectiveness of different communication approaches to promoting more egalitarian gender norms (Marcus and Page, 2014). In order to address this gap, as part of the UK Department for International Development-funded flagship programme on Transforming the Lives of Girls and Young Women, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) conducted a review, based on systematic review principles, of evidence on the effectiveness of communications programmes for changing norms affecting adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries. Communications initiatives have been classified across a broad spectrum of different types (see Box 1).

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1 This section is adapted from Bantebya et al., forthcoming

Box 1: Typology of communications interventions used in ODI systematic review

- Mass media and social media programming/engagement
- Information, education and communication (IEC) provision through dissemination of materials, billboards, stickers, educational videos, or events such as street theatre
- Community dialogue and reflection
- Non-formal education approaches, including life-skills training
- One-to-one programming, including mentoring, peer education
- Public ceremonies, including alternative rites of passage and public declaration activities
- Training, capacity building, most commonly for professional personnel (e.g. health workers)
- Hybrid approaches of the interventions listed above
- Communications integrated with other approaches (particularly economic empowerment + communication or other ideational component)

In all, 61 programmes were examined in the review – half from sub-Saharan Africa, around a third in South Asia, and the rest from other regions of the developing world. Around a quarter were embedded within diverse adolescent development programmes; around a third each were linked to either sexual and reproductive health promotion initiatives or programmes focusing on gender equality; and the others were part of broad-based community development efforts.

Source: Marcus and Page (2014)

The evidence from the review showed that communication programmes are an effective way to challenge gender-discriminatory attitudes and practices and have reached a variety of stakeholders with both broad pro-gender equality messages and messages on specific discriminatory norms. While no single approach was found to be clearly more effective than others, programmes with more than one communication component have achieved a higher proportion of positive outcomes. Moreover, integrated programmes with non-communication activities have also been slightly more effective. The highest proportion of positive changes was in programmes addressing early marriage, education, female genital mutilation/cutting and intra-household relationships. These programmes often involved community-level dialogue and reflection (Marcus and Page, 2014).

The review found that communications initiatives lead to change through the following impact pathways:

- Dialogue-based approaches are often important in creating opportunities for reflection and helping people shift both attitudes and practices.
- More intensive activities involving direct communication with target groups and providing space for dialogue seems to have greater impact than mass communication alone.
- Combined non-formal education and community dialogue showed positive impacts on attitudes towards girls' education held by parents and – in some cases – brothers.
- Appealing TV and radio characters can act as role models, while villainous characters can also stimulate behaviour change. This seemed to be particularly important in initiatives around early marriage.
- IEC activities play a helpful role in supporting and extending changes initiated by other types of programme.
- Communications can address issues of concern directly and provide enough factual information so audiences can contemplate change or reframe issues so people can see it in a new way.
- Working with multiple stakeholders, combined approaches can identify or address barriers to turning knowledge into action. For example, poverty is in some contexts an important barrier to changing practices and attitudes towards girls' education and needs to be addressed appropriately (Marcus, 2014b).

Figure 2 summarises diagrammatically the working theory of change guiding the review. It draws (1) on analysis of processes leading to change in gender norms that informed year two research and (2) insights from the communication for development literature as well as the wider literature on effective communication. It shows the

stylised pathways by which communications of different types can lead to changes in norms, and which the programmes discussed in this report aimed to set in motion.

However, no social change is linear or mechanistic: providing information or encouraging people to think about an issue in a different way does not necessarily lead to change in attitudes or behaviour. The diagram, therefore, outlines expected or 'hoped-for' relationships and outcomes, acknowledging that, in any situation, a number of other factors will affect outcomes (Marcus and Page, 2014). (A more detailed, 'log-frame' type diagram can be found in Annex 1).

Figure 6: Conceptual framework for gender norm change through communications initiatives

Target groups

Adolescent girls/young women
Adolescent boys/young men
Parents and grandparents
In-laws
Community leaders
Religious leaders

Intended processes of change

Develop new knowledge and understanding from:
New information
Dialogue with peers and role models

Develop community of people with new norms
Develop reference groups with new views or commitment to changed practice to sustain change

Role modelling
Modelling/endorsement of change by peers or change-makers
Promoting self-efficiency
Endorsement of change by influential people (e.g. community/religious leaders/celebrities)

- Non-formal participatory education
- Community dialogue
- Provision of information materials
- Public/arts events (e.g. street theatre, puppet shows)
- Training for service providers (e.g. on laws and practice)

- Non-formal education, group mobilisation
- One-to-one communication, mentoring
- Public commitments

- Entertainment (mass media, street theatre etc.)
- Mass-media messaging campaigns (public service announcements and other media-based awareness-raising/messaging
- One-to-one communication

Programmatic issues affected by:

Intensity of exposure
Participation of target audiences in developing messages
Extent communication methods are combined with each other
Framing of messages
Opportunities to put new ideas into practice

Contextual issues affected by:

Culture/religious beliefs
Politicisation of gender issues
Socioeconomic factors affecting:
- access to communications
- capacity to act on changes

Supported by non-communication activities:

e.g. Livelihood strengthening, safe spaces/opportunities for girls to build social networks, bridge to formal education, enhanced access to health services, sports and games etc.

Intended outcomes

More egalitarian gender norms & attitudes
Reduction in gender discriminatory practices

- Early marriage
- Transactional and intergenerational sex
- FGM/C
- In education
- Related to mobility, roles and aspirations
- Son preference
- Physical and sexual violence

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A number of knowledge gaps were also identified in the review. These included key programme design issues such as the kinds of messages that most motivate change, the relative effectiveness of different communications initiatives; differences between stand-alone communications and more integrated approaches; the definition of 'thresholds' for the optimum number of communications activities to achieve maximum effect; the role of informal peer communications; and the role of social media and new technologies in promoting gender-equalitarian norms (Marcus and Page, 2014; Marcus, 2014a). It is here that the project's round of qualitative primary research aimed to make a contribution, as we detail below.

1.4 Study objectives, design and methodology

Building on findings from years one and two, and drawing on insights from the review of communications initiatives, the primary research underpinning this report explores how selected communications initiatives translate policy commitments to address discriminatory gender norms, attitudes and practices around early marriage, teen pregnancy and girls' education.[2] The assessment adopts a social norms lens to explore the ways in which selected programmes are working with adolescent girls to tackle early marriage, teenage pregnancy and under-investment in girls' education through communication interventions, as broadly defined above.

Key research objectives are:

- to highlight examples of good practice
- to identify external and internal programming factors contributing to good practice
- to make recommendations – based on our understanding of capability deprivations adolescents girls face (year one) and drivers of social norm change processes (year two) – as to how these programmes and broader programming and policy efforts could be enhanced.

Key research questions the report addresses are as follows:

- To what extent do core policy frameworks (both government and NGO) with relevance to early marriage, teen pregnancy and education consider the role of social norms? If they do, how are social norms framed? What sort of approaches are proposed to tackle or harness social norms? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these policy commitments vis-à-vis what we collectively know on social norm change processes?
- How are policy commitments pertaining to social norm change processes in turn reflected in programme design? To what extent do programme design features adequately take into account the diversity of norm drivers / forces for stasis?
- How closely is programme design translated at implementation level? What factors facilitate implementation? Which factors constrain effective implementation?
- Implementing personnel's understanding of social norm dynamics
- Buy-in from external stakeholders
- Political economy dynamics at sub-national level
- Resource availability –financial, time, human resources
- Context variables – e.g. shifts in policies or laws
- How are (intended) beneficiaries and their families perceiving and experiencing change? To what extent have community norms and their views on these shifted? Do they think this approach is optimal or are there alternative entry points?

1.5 Case study selection in Viet Nam

Identifying good practice examples of communication approaches aimed at changing gender norms in Viet Nam's Hmong community proved a challenging task given that the Hmong are a relatively small population clustered in a relatively small geographic location (see Annex 5 for our programme mapping). We were able to identify only one programme aimed specifically at helping Hmong adolescent girls delay their marriages and improve their capabilities – Plan's *Because I am a Girl* (BIAAG). Throwing the net a bit wider, we included Oxfam's *My Rights,*

My Voice (MRMV), which is aimed at improving Hmong children's access to their rights by fostering accountability in the education sector. For our third case study we examined the extra-curricular/life-skills programming offered by the government-run Meo Vac High School.

Our evaluation of these good practice examples included a review of programme documents, including internal evaluations where possible, and an array of interviews with a variety of stakeholders. Specifically, we interviewed key informants at national and subnational levels and, in each location, programme beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Focus group discussions were held with adolescent girls, adolescent boys, mothers, fathers, and teachers, and also included community mappings. We also interviewed individual adolescents, primarily girl beneficiaries, officials who worked for the commune, the Women's Union and the Youth Union, and programme implementers (see Annex 2 for research instruments and purpose).

Figure 7: Completed interviews, by site

Programme site	No. of focus group discussions	No. of focus group discussion participants	No. of in-depth interviews with adolescents	No. of key informant interviews
Plan	5	35	8	4
Oxfam	5	28	8	4
High school	3	15	9	1
National level				14

It should be noted that because the three programmes are quite different, the stories which emerged in the case studies are also quite different. Specifically, because the programming at MeoVac High School was largely ad-hoc, given that rapid increases in enrolment had led the school to discontinue all formal extra-curricular SRH programming, the data from that site tends to reflect not programming—but the broader lives of Hmong adolescents. On the other hand, data from the other two site more closely tracks Plan's BIAAG and Oxfam's MR, MV programming.

1.6 Ethical considerations

With the sensitivity of the topic and a focus on adolescent girls, the study was conducted following national and international ethical standards for research on children. The basic ethical framework was built on principles of respect for the rights and needs of children and doing no harm. Key ethical considerations included measures to enhance participation and inclusion of excluded groups in the research, to ensure informed consent, to protect children and to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

2 Setting the stage: Locating Hmong girls' realities

Hmong girls are located in a rather singular nexus. They live in a country with a one-party state that controls not only the law—but social messaging. Additionally, and also unusually, Hmong girls are growing up in an isolated and insular culture that not only limits their contact with the broader Vietnamese culture, but in many cases totally precludes it. Indeed, in the case of Hmong girls, that broader culture, which has experienced recent rapid change brought on by the grafting of economic development onto traditional Confucian culture, is largely observed—through teachers and officials rather than experienced directly.

2.1 The Vietnamese political context

The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam is a one-party state, led by the Vietnamese Communist Party, which, despite economic liberalisation and increasing decentralisation retains tight national control over a wide variety of policy areas (Fritzen, 2006) – albeit with increasing input from INGOs, UN agencies and donors. There are

Figure 5: Hmong girls are uniquely situated

four layers of government in Viet Nam: central, provincial, district and commune. While the Communist Party has the overall leadership role at all levels, the party itself is 'functionally pluralist', which on the one hand offers more space for decentralisation than may be immediately obvious and the other hand leads to a certain fragility of power that often causes an overinvestment in maintaining credibility (Nguyen-Hoang and Schroeder, 2010).

Increasing decentralisation has been useful where it allows communes to target policies to their own needs – such as fining the families of truant children to encourage school attendance – but is hardly a panacea for broader development and poverty reduction challenges. Because the state's share of economic output has remained both constant and large (Gainsborough, 2010) and Viet Nam's citizens are represented *de jure*, if not *de facto*, by a plethora of state-sponsored mass organisations such as the Women's Union and the Youth Union, the central government remains monolithic in the minds of many. Policy tends to be top-down, rather than bottom-up, and, once enacted, 'actors involved are then expected to be bound by it' (Harris et al., 2011: viii). This tends not only to leave lower-level authorities in a holding pattern, waiting for proclamations from above, but also to stifle local innovation and targeted responses, particularly in areas where language and cultural barriers make it difficult for local citizens to make their needs known (Jones et al., 2012). For example, while there is a unified push to encourage families to have no more than two children, there is insufficient attention paid to the diverse drivers of fertility. Similarly, targets for poverty reduction are often set by the central government with inadequate input from local authorities.

Box 2: The Hmong at a glance

The Hmong are few and geographically isolated

- According to the 2009 Census, the Hmong are one of Viet Nam's larger ethnic minority groups but number just over 1 million out of a total population of about 90 million (GSO, 2010).
- The Hmong rarely leave their mountain homeland. The 2009 Census found, for example, only 1,000 living in Ha Noi and 250 living in Ho Chi Minh City (UNFPA, 2011a).

Despite hard work, the Hmong remain very poor

- The Hmong have the highest rate of economic activity in Viet Nam – 93.2% compared to only 76.7% for the country as a whole. Hmong women are slightly more likely to be economically active than Hmong men (93.9% compared to 92.5%), which is markedly different from country averages (71.6% for women versus 82.2% for men) (UNFPA, 2011a).
- Nearly 99% of Hmong people are self-employed in agriculture (GSO, 2012b).
- The rural poverty rate among the Hmong is over 93% (World Bank, 2012).
- The Hmong rural poverty gap is over 45% (World Bank, 2012).
- According to the 2009 Census, nearly 96% of Hmong households fall into the poorest quintile and more than 99% are either poor or extremely poor (UNFPA, 2011a).

The Hmong are the least educated of Viet Nam's minorities

- Less than 38% of Hmong men and only 20% of Hmong women are literate (UNFPA, 2011a).
- In 2012, the gross enrolment rate for Hmong lower secondary school students was 64.1% – up from 56.3% in 2006 but far below the 94.5% for Kinh (ethnic majority) students (GSO, 2012a).
- In 2012, the gross enrolment rate for Hmong high school students was 20.4% – up from 15.1% in 2006 but far below the 78.1% for Kinh students (GSO, 2012a).
- Hmong girls remain significantly disadvantaged compared to their male peers in terms of education – especially at higher levels. While the 2009 Census found a high school net enrolment rate of only 9.7% for Hmong boys, only 3.4% of Hmong girls were enrolled in high school (UNFPA, 2011a).
- Low levels of education in the Hmong community have made it impossible for the government to ensure that all Hmong children are taught by Hmong teachers. While 50% of teachers in Ha Giang are Hmong, there are not enough Hmong teachers for all schools in all communes.

The Hmong marry and have children young

- According to the 2009 Census, the Hmong have the lowest age at first marriage in Viet Nam – 18.8 years for women, compared to over 23 years for their Kinh counterparts, meaning that many marry below the internationally defined age of adulthood (UNFPA, 2011a).
- The adolescent birth rate is not available by ethnicity. However, while the 2014 national rate was 45 per 1,000 – the region with the highest Hmong population, the Northern Midlands and Mountains, had a rate of 107 per 1,000 (GSO and UNICEF, 2014).
- The rate of child marriage is not available by ethnicity. However, while nationally 10.3% of the girls aged 15-19 were already married in 2014, 22.6% of girls that age in the Northern Midlands and Mountains had already formed a union (GSO and UNICEF, 2014).

The Hmong population is young and vulnerable

- According to the 2009 Census, the Hmong have the highest fertility rate in Viet Nam – 4.96 children per woman. While this is down tremendously since 1989, when the total fertility rate was 9.3, it is vastly higher than the country average, which is only 2.03 (UNFPA, 2011a).
- Not surprisingly, the Hmong have Viet Nam's youngest population. Whereas less than 25% of the country as a whole is under the age of 15, over 45% of the Hmong are still children (UNFPA, 2011a).

- The infant (46 per 1,000) and child (72 per 1,000) mortality rates for the Hmong are about three times higher than country averages (16 and 24 respectively) (UNFPA, 2011a).

2.2 Hmong culture and history[3]

The Hmong are one of 53 ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam, and one of the poorest — primarily because they overwhelmingly remain subsistence farmers who are able, due to the climate and geography in which they live, to harvest only one crop each year — rather than the three now common in the Mekong Delta. Numbering just over 1 million, according to the 2009 Census, and originating from China nearly 4,000 years ago, there are, after migrations that began less than two centuries ago, significant Hmong populations in the northern mountains of both Viet Nam and Lao PDR (Lee and Pfeifer, 2006; Michaud, 2010; Duffy et al., 2004). Hmong culture, which sees ethnic identity as more important than national borders, has left the majority of these populations living in 'geographical exclusive spaces separated from the Kinh and other minorities' (Luong and Nieke, 2013:7; see also Baulch et al., 2004). It has both insulated them from the larger Kinh culture that moved into their mountains when the government was actively working to shift populations[7] and minimised recent internal migration. While the Hmong diaspora, now over three decades old, has forged new ties between rural mountain villages and the international community, Hmong insularity[8] and a preference for 'selective involvement' with modernity, which includes an integration into the larger cash economy that is tenuous at best, account for the persistence of many traditional practices and cultural preferences that still shape Hmong lives on a daily basis (Turner and Michaud, 2009: 54-55; see also Luong, 2013; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Michaud, 2011; Baulch et al., 2004).

2.3 Involvement with the government: yesterday and today

A full overview of Hmong interaction with the government is well beyond the scope of this paper, but there are a variety of comparatively recent events that continue to reverberate loudly today – primarily because they have tended to reinforce Hmong insularity and Kinh beliefs about Hmong 'otherness'. First, during the late 19th century, under French colonial rule, the northern mountains of Viet Nam were under military, rather than civilian, administration, in order to facilitate control of local populations (Michaud, 2010). Second, while upland minorities, including the Hmong, had hoped to secure local governance, this did not eventuate under Communist Party rule. Instead, sedentarisation and collectivisation became official policy with important spill-over effects on Hmong land rights and farming practices (Michaud, 2010; Turner, 2012a). While after Doi Moi (the liberalisation of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s), land was returned to the Hmong, the majority remain in the most remote, difficult to reach villages—rather than in the valley villages where the Kinh and other more assimilated minorities tend to live.

Furthermore, while there has been a plethora of anti-poverty programming aimed at communes with high minority populations, that programming tends to be geographically, rather than individually, targeted. Combined with the reality that Hmong families most often live in remote villages, even these targeted programmes often result in only limited access to improvements such as electricity and clean water or services such as health stations and cultural houses.

2.4 Agency

Much is made in the academic literature about Hmong agency (see, e.g., Michaud, 2011; Ngo, 2010; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Turner, 2012b; Turner and Michaud, 2009). For example, Turner (2012b) notes that, while the Hmong have options, they are in some ways 'rural renegades' (p.415); Michaud (2011) says that they are 'tactically selective about modernity' (p.2). They choose to grow their own varieties of rice, because they taste better and are 'traditional', they elect to given birth at home rather than at health clinics, they opt to use shamans rather than physicians, they engage with the cash economy only enough to meet their immediate needs, they prefer to make their own clothing rather than purchase cheaper ready-made substitutes, and they see formal education as fundamentally less useful to their children than learning to do traditional tasks the traditional way. Turner (2012b)

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3 For more thorough reviews of Hmong history and culture, see Luong and Nieke, 2013 and Duffy et al., 2004. For more wide-ranging exploration, see the Hmong Studies Journal at: http://www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/

concludes that both government and development agencies need to acknowledge that the Hmong are fundamentally happy with their identities and should 'acknowledge different cultural values, necessities, and priorities' (p.417).

While this is true, and we agree that 'policy initiatives based on detailed ethnographic study, a greater understanding of cultural particularities and negotiated participatory approaches' are vital, we caution that the needs of Hmong adolescent girls are not necessarily synonymous with those of the adults in their families and communities—and that even the interests of adults are hardly monolithic (Turner, 2012b: 417). Michaud (2011) notes, for example, that, while adult Hmong in China wish to keep to the old ways, 'youth urgently want to become modern and successful' (p.18). Similarly, Duong (2008) observes – after years of ethnographic research with Hmong girls in Lao Cai – that those who engage in tourism-related activities 'transform themselves' in the process (p.254). As they engage with the larger world around them, their tastes in food and clothing change and they move 'far from the margins' on which they started their lives (ibid.). In order to ensure that Hmong adolescent girls are given the space and support they need to become the women.

2.5 Hmong adolescent girls

Hmong girls' day to day lives and capabilities are shaped by a combination of son preference and limited resources—which serve to continually reinforce that preference. In some ways their realities mirror those of their non-Hmong peers. In other ways, however, they are sharply different. Our previous research found that gender norms surrounding the ideas about what makes a good daughter versus a good son within the Hmong community are key to understanding girls' experiences from early childhood. As they progress through adolescence, girls are pushed more and more to develop the skills and traits they will need to become good wives and mothers – which are, as noted in our second year report, with few exceptions the only roles open to them. Understanding these norms, which define not only what girls and women do but also what they *ought* to do (Bicchieri, 2006; Heise, 2011), is thus required in order to capture the nuances of girls' lives.

Below, combining our own first two years of research with that of other academics, we present a brief overview detailing the forces shaping Hmong girls' capabilities. This section is organized around childhood development trajectories as they offer the clearest picture of how disadvantage builds on itself over time.

2.5.1 Son preference: shaping lives from birth

While son preference is fundamental to understanding even the broader Kinh culture, and is behind the growing imbalance in Viet Nam's sex ratio[13], in many ways it is a particularly powerful shaper of Hmong girls' lives. Reinforced by patrilocal residence patterns, throughout Vietnam sons are seen as crucial to continue the family line and to provide support in old age; their birth improves the status of their mothers within the family and their fathers within the community (Guilmoto, 2012; Nanda et al., 2012; GSO, 2011; UNFPA, 2011b; ISDS, 2010; Plan International, 2008). Among the Hmong, boys and men maintain 'a monopoly upon religious performances: death rituals, birth rituals, rituals to ancestors and wedding rituals' (Lemoine, 2012: 17; see also Lee and Tapp, 2010; Duffy et al., 2004; Khang, 2010; Thao, 2010).

The Hmong culture is highly patriarchal, with men and women having defined roles and responsibilities. Hmong parents impose stricter rules and expectations on daughters than sons, to protect the reputation and chastity of their daughters before. Cultural expectations of being "ib tug ntxhais txim txiaj" or "a good/obedient Hmong daughter" include knowing how to speak Hmong; respecting her elders; staying home to cook, clean and care for siblings; being academically successful; and abstaining from socializing with or dating boys

(Thao, 2010: 2)

Daughters, who become members of their husbands' families both physically and spiritually, are thus seen as 'other people's women' from the moment of their birth and are disadvantaged in a number of key ways (Lee and Tapp, 2010: 153; see also Lemoine, 2012; Duffy et al., 2004; Khang, 2010; Thao, 2010). For example, because son preference is an important driver of high fertility, girls are more likely than boys to have many siblings and to be poor (Chaudhuri, 2012; Teerawichitchainan et al., 2007). In addition, from early childhood they are given the lion's share of household chores, with girls tending to 'work twice the amount of boys: caring for siblings, doing household chores, collecting wood and water, and caring for buffalo' (DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009: 167; see also

Khang, 2010 and Duffy et al., 2004). This workload restricts their mobility, precludes time for rest, relaxation and socialisation and has significant impacts on their education. Girls in our previous rounds of research, observing that the lives of girls and boys are '*just different*', did not mind that their brothers were allowed time off to play. Indeed, they often noted that their *older* brothers were '*just young*' and needed that time off. They were, however, quite wistful about their brothers' uninterrupted homework time. Despite that wistfulness, son preference remains prevalent even among Hmong adolescent girls. Many told us that while they would allow their future sons to complete 12th grade, their future daughters would have to leave school after 9th grade to come home and work in preparation for marriage.

2.5.2 Poverty: limited resources reinforce tradition

While '(e)conomic growth achievements in Vietnam stand as a spectacular success story' (UCW, 2009: 3), as noted earlier, minorities in general and the Hmong in particular have been left behind, with devastating consequences for Hmong girls given their unequal access to resources. Indeed, as was mentioned above, the poverty gap between minority groups and the Kinh majority, like the educational gap, is steadily growing larger (Baulch and Vu, 2012; Dang, 2010). From 1998 to 2008, the poverty headcount for Kinh households fell more than threefold, from 38.8% to 11.7%, while the gains for minority groups over the same period were more modest, with poverty rates dropping by less than one-third, from 75% to 52.5%.

There is a great deal of heterogeneity in Viet Nam's ethnic minorities. The Hmong, with a poverty rate of over 80%, are amongst the most disadvantaged (Baulch and Vu, 2012). For example, they have the highest poverty rate, and the lowest educational achievements' (Luong and Nieke, 2013: 3) and 'the lowest population using clean water sources (13%) and hygienic toilets (3%)' (UNFPA, 2011a: 3). Given their geographic and cultural isolation, which in more remote areas remains nearly complete despite State efforts to relocate entire villages closer to the schools, health centres and roads of commune centres, they – and particularly their women – do not typically undertake non-agricultural work. Indeed, less than a quarter of the income of 'other Northern upland minorities', of whom the Hmong are among the most numerous, is derived from non-farm sources, compared with over 70% of that of the rural Kinh (Baulch and Vu, 2012).

There are, notes Friederichsen (2012), a variety of reasons for this. First, when Kinh households were resettled to the mountains they were often given land along main roads, which made market access substantially easier. Second, Kinh families came into the mountain with strong ties to their natal communities – which again improved market access. Furthermore, because newly settled Kinh families were often given very small plots of land, they were forced 'into producing higher-value crops early on, which enabled them to accumulate sufficient capital to engage in off-farm activities such as processing, trade, and services' (p.42). Finally, as a variety of authors note, many Hmong are fundamentally not interested in pursuing other more lucrative livelihoods (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Turner, 2012a; 2012b; Turner and Michaud, 2009).

While some do grow cardamom, deal with tourists and produce textiles, these activities are seen as supplementary and the core of Hmong identity remains rooted in subsistence farming (ibid.). The Hmong also rarely migrate (DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009; Michaud, 2008; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Turner, 2012a; 2012b; Turner and Michaud, 2009). While approximately one-third of Vietnam's Kinh population now lives in urban areas, less than 3% of the Hmong live in cities (GSO, 2010b). Indeed, key informants from the year one research indicated that migration rates have actually dropped in recent years, due to the mitigating influence of anti-poverty programming.

Despite their agricultural lifestyles, many Hmong remain vulnerable to food insecurity. In Ha Giang, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (2004) notes that many ethnic families experience an extended hunger gap, with the Government of Viet Nam (2001) adding that food insecurity is a particular problem in Meo Vac due to its scarcity of agricultural land and climate. In nearby Lao Cai province, recent rates of food insecurity are estimated to be as high as 50% (Bonnin and Turner, 2012; see also FAO, 2004; Pandey et al., 2006). Indeed, in its Ban Lien commune Oxfam and ActionAid (2011) found that 71% of study participants reported 'often' experiencing food shortages.

There is reason to suspect that food insecurity may worsen over time, as the area's mountainous geography and severe shortage of water – combined with 'factors such as population growth, state-sponsored sedentarisation, land allocation and resettlement schemes' – has led to 'intense pressure on available arable land' (World Bank,

2009, in Bonnin and Turner, 2012: 98). Complicating food production issues further is the fact that most families in Meo Vac grow corn rather than rice, due to the difficulty of farming rice on steep slopes. While that has done much to mitigate immediate hunger, corn is notorious for its negative impacts on soil fertility when grown annually over years and decades (World Issues: 360, 2010).

Study participants in our previous research concurred with these findings and observations, but also noted the overwhelming difference that anti-poverty programming has made to their communes. Most families continue to live in simple one room dwellings that are inadequate to fend off the bitter cold of winter and rely on the constant labour of all adults and girl children in order to make ends meet. Furthermore, most girls know that upper secondary school is out of reach because their parents are poor. That said, adult respondents noted that hunger in their villages is largely a thing of the past and that along with roads and electricity have come modern conveniences such as corn grinders and motorbikes, which are both reducing workloads and improving productivity.

2.5.3 Education: tremendous progress, but still unequal

A strong preference for sons and limited resources combine to reduce Hmong girls' options for schooling in ways that are markedly different from their non-Hmong peers. On a national level, Viet Nam's progress towards educating its children has been as spectacular as its economic success. Indeed, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2012) note that '[b]etween 1992 and 2008, primary level completion rates rose from 45.0 per cent to 89.8 per cent' (p.1). Furthermore, Viet Nam 'has closed and even reversed gender gaps in primary, secondary and tertiary schooling' (World Bank, 2011: 27). Despite this laudable progress, however, 'disparities still remain and education attainment is much lower among several groups, particularly among ethnic minority groups' (MoET and UNICEF, 2012: 1). While some ethnic groups have enrolment rates approaching those of the Kinh, overall the enrolment gap at upper-secondary level has grown over the past decade, as Kinh students have made larger gains than minority children (Baulch and Vu, 2012). Addressing this gap is vital, given that Wells-Dang (2012) found that 'improved education levels' are an important factor (along with 'improved market access') in explaining why some ethnic communities are beginning to close the gap between themselves and the Kinh (p.37).

Hmong children are particularly disadvantaged educationally; as can be seen in Figure 5 below, only a tiny percentage complete secondary school. There are two stories in these numbers. First, reflecting the reality that this is the first generation of Hmong children to have the option of formal education, enrolment rates are low for all children – regardless of gender. Second, Hmong girls are significantly less likely to attend school, particularly high school, than their brothers. While even at the primary level boys' enrolment (78%) is higher than girls' (67%), by upper-secondary school Hmong boys are nearly three times more likely to be enrolled (9.7% versus 3.4%) (UNFPA, 2011a).

Figure 6: Hmong net enrolment rates by age and gender (UNFPA, 2011a)
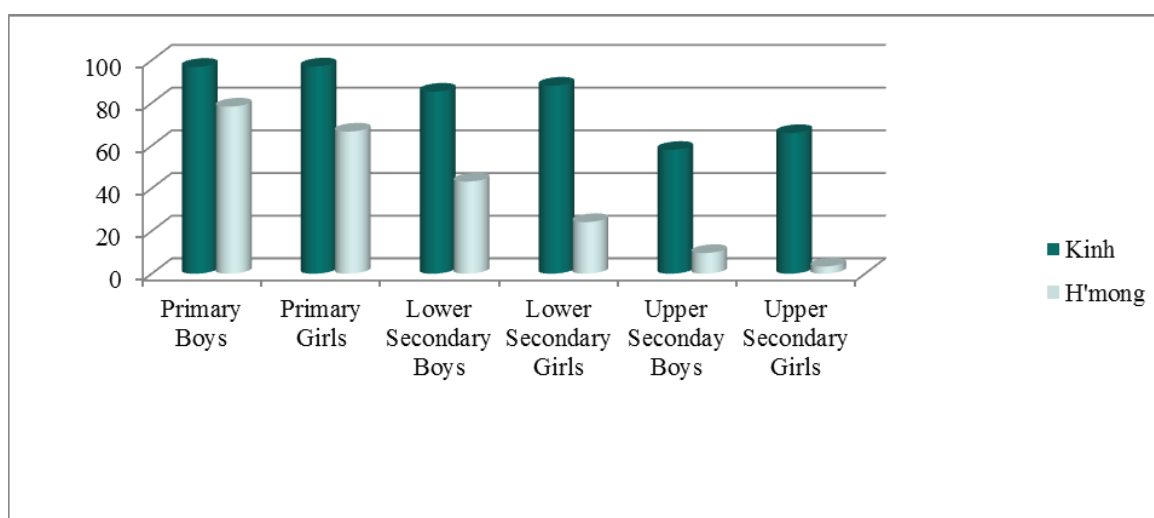
A variety of barriers make it difficult for Hmong girls to access education. For example, while few children, boys or girls, begin school able to speak Vietnamese, girls' progress on this front tends to be slower (2012; UNICEF et al., 2008; World Bank, 2009; Teerawichitchainan et al. 2007). Not only do they tend to be very shy, but they are kept so busy in unpaid household chores that they have fewer non-Hmong social outlets in which to practice their language skills. While the Government has attempted to remediate language barriers by ensuring that all villages have kindergartens, so that exposure to Vietnamese comes earlier, there are only a handful of mother-tongue primary classrooms in the country. Given that many of the younger adolescents with whom we spoke were not yet fluent in the Kinh language, there are concerns that this monolingual curriculum is broadly hindering learning.

This language barrier is compounded by the fact that girls are already, as was mentioned above, seen as 'poor investments', because they will leave their natal families on marriage (Liu, 2004; see also DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009; Lee and Tapp, 2010; UNICEF et al., 2008). Evidence of continued son preference in regard to education was clear in our previous research. In addition to the attitudes expressed by adolescents, it was notable that even in families that clearly valued education – and had sent one or more children, even a girl – on to upper secondary school or university, it was often the case that one of the family's daughters was never sent to school at all, as her labour was needed at home. This was despite the fact that teachers widely recognised that girls are better students than boys, as they are generally more focussed and less playful (in large part due to familial expectations and domestic work pressures).

That said, driven by the national government's commitment to achieve universal lower-secondary education and reduce ethnic minority poverty (as per the 2011-2015 Socioeconomic Development Plan and Resolution 80), there has been tremendous progress on the educational front in just the last few years—progress that is not yet visible in national level statistics. In only one generation, policy and messaging have altered not only what girls do, but what their communities and families believe they *ought* to do. By investing heavily in educational infrastructure, which has brought satellite schools for the youngest primary students to even the most remote communities, providing subsidies for Hmong students, engaging in door-to-door mobilisation, strictly enforcing fines[4] for truancy, and engaging with children themselves about the importance of education to their own non-agricultural futures, the government has transformed girls' access to school through 9th grade. Most are now completing lower-secondary school and many would like to attend university. Very few, however, are allowed by their parents to make the transition to upper secondary school, which most often entails expensive boarding.

While upper secondary school is rarely judged worthwhile even for boys, given the dearth of non-agricultural employment options in the highlands, families in our previous rounds of research were overwhelmingly likely to admit that *if* a child were to be sent to high school, it would be a boy—because *"the daughter will get married and can't make money for their parents. The sons can make money for their parents after graduating"* (mother). Even more than actual costs, however, families identified the opportunity costs of boarding school as a key reason for keeping girls at home. Parents need girls' labour. The "need" for adolescent *girls'*, as opposed to boys', labour is particularly strong because most—statistically speaking—will have only a few years between finishing lower-secondary school and marriage. Knowing that their biggest contribution to their parents' well-being is their own short-term labour, and constrained by broader norms which mandate not just obedience but subservience to one's elders, girls in our research almost without exception left school for the fields when they were told to do so. Boys, secure in the knowledge that *'in the future they will inherit everything'* (commune level informant), appear to be far less malleable to parents' wishes. Though many do leave school in order to come home and work alongside their parents, the fact that their own longer-term interests more closely align with those of their parents' means that they rarely have to choose between their individual and family futures.

2.5.4 Silence and isolation: limiting agency, perpetuating the past
Constrained by both youth and gender, adolescent girls across Viet Nam have limited voice not only in their families, but also over their own lives. Lewis (2005) notes that filial piety, which mandates respect and obedience towards one's elders—as well as care for them in their old age—permeates Vietnamese culture, leading to a 'near-constant sense of awareness of the debt one owes' (p. 12). Ultimately this piety drives many of the "decisions" that adolescents make about their own futures, as they faithfully accept their parents' choices even when they know them to be, in the longer-run, disadvantageous. Gender adds another layer to girls' lack of voice, as by tradition they are bound by three rules: before marriage, they must obey their fathers, during marriage, they must

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4 Fines are set on a village basis and can be paid with public labour by poor families

follow their husbands, and after widowhood, they must listen to their sons (Nguyen, 1995, in Volkmann, 2005; see also ISDS, 2010; UNICEF, 2010).

Embedded in a culture that 'generally place(s) the interest of the group – whether it is the family, the clan, or the community – before the interests of the individual', and 'traditionally view(s) social roles, in terms of family, age and gender, as fixed', Hmong girls, particularly those from most isolated communes, have little space to exercise their agency and imagine new futures (Duffy et al., 2004: 38). Indeed, among the families in our previous research, most girls could not imagine expressing their own opinions. While they actively participated in classroom academics, and even took on assigned leadership roles, they were almost shocked when asked if they felt they could speak to their teachers about non-academic topics. Most critically, while the majority felt they could tell their parents if they wanted a particular shirt at the market, none were able to change their parents' minds about school-leaving. Few even tried. While it should be noted that age also plays a role in this limited agency – as the obligations of filial piety weigh on boys as well as girls – among our study participants, boys are given substantially more freedom, both in terms of mobility and decision-making, than girls. As one noted, '*My brothers have more freedom*'.

In our year-one research[5], the strongest theme to emerge regarding girls' voice was not, however, in regard to decision-making, which they considered a largely foreign concept that had little place in their lives, but was rather in regard to their social isolation. Driven by cultural norms, time poverty, physical isolation after they leave school, and an intense need not to burden their already over-burdened mothers, most girls we interviewed were very lonely. They did not feel that they could speak to their teachers about non-academic subjects, they did not feel they could speak to their friends, even when they had time to see them, about anything that might touch family honour, like their experiences with gender-based violence, and they recognised that their mothers were even more overworked and socially isolated than they were. While girls enjoyed gathering wood and grass together in the afternoon, few were able to identify a single person in their lives to whom they could turn with a problem or with whom they could explore a dream.

Box 3: Hmong childhood and adolescence

Traditionally, as the 'Hmong believe that a person should be industrious, contribute to the family in the form of labour, and fulfil their role in society as soon as they are able', the community has no concept of adolescence (Vang and Bogenschutz, 2011: 146). Indeed, Lemoine (2012a) reports that historically they have had no concept of even childhood. While relations are governed by strict hierarches of age, a child's world is not seen as fundamentally different from an adult's and children are treated 'with the same respect given a living adult individual', in part because of beliefs that 'he is but the reincarnation of a passed away adult' (p.8).

That said, increased opportunities for schooling have quickly brought the concept of childhood into sharp relief in Hmong communities, as children now have their own spaces in which they spend hours each day involved in academic pursuits that fundamentally separate their world from that of adults, as the material they study at school has little to do with the reality of their home lives.

Adolescence, on the other hand, remains a tenuous concept, even for adolescents. While it might be argued that the space between school-leaving and marriage is serving as a functional adolescence, as children are still seen as children, this period in many ways is more infantilising than maturing. Adolescents, and particularly girls, are expected to shoulder an adult workload, but have no voice in family decision-making.

2.5.5 Marriage practices: restricting girls' roles but showing signs of change
Hmong marriage practices have shifted considerably over recent decades due to both encroaching modernisation and the enforcement of Vietnamese law, which prohibits the marriage of girls under the age of 18 and boys under

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5 Our year two research did not return to this theme

the age of 20 (T.H. Nguyen et al., 2011; Teerawichitchainan et al. 2007). However, despite the fact that arranged marriages and forcible bride kidnappings have been increasingly supplanted by boy-initiated "love" matches--and the statistical reality that the age of first marriage appears to be steadily climbing--marriage still works in a variety of ways to limit Hmong girls' options, as our second year research highlighted.

While it has been suggested that early marriage amongst the Hmong is in large part cultural preference (Amin and Teerawichitchainan, 2009), one that continues to be quite common even among second- and third-generation diasporic Hmong communities (Vang and Bogenschutz, 2011; Lemoine, 2012; Khang, 2010; Duffy et al., 2004), DeJaeghere and Miske (2009) report that it is not, by and large, *girls*' preference. 'Most girls,' they note, 'did not want to marry early', even though they recognised that their family was poor and that their husband's family needed 'to have more labour' (pp.168-169). This is hardly surprising, given the constant negotiation required for young Hmong wives, who must juggle not only the demands of marriage and motherhood, but also those of in-laws (Jones et al., 2014; T.H. Nguyen et al., 2011; Khang, 2010; Duffy et al., 2004). This latter role, seen as ancillary in the West, is so central that Long (2008) reports that according to Hmong custom, marriage is seen as 'becoming a daughter-in-law'.

Indeed, our second year research identified that frantic juggling as a significant driver of Hmong boys' attraction—with boys admitting that they only wanted to marry girls who are "*skilful*", "*diligent*" and "*able to cut a big tree*", even if they are "*uglier*"—and primary reason that girls would prefer to delay marriage until adulthood. Girls were cognizant of the fact that if they were forced to wake at 4 a.m. to begin their chores in their natal homes, once married they would have to wake at 3:30. Knowing that young brides are expected to prove their worth with near constant labour and that regardless of their efforts they are unlikely to be found satisfactory, we found that nearly all girls would prefer to marry once their bodies and hearts were strong enough to bear the burden that will be asked of them.

While girls' preference for avoiding child marriage was expected, given the literature, our second round of research uncovered two things which were not. First, despite the fact that respondents in the more centrally located villages of our first round of research had only anecdotal stories about child marriage, we found in the second year's more remote villages that child marriage was more common than we had suspected. Indeed, we found a number of girls who had been married as very young adolescents. Because of the way in which Hmong marriages are contracted, with the girl simply moving into the boys' family home, child marriages among the Hmong are officially invisible. It is not, we learned, uncommon for couples to wait to report their marriages to the commune until they are legally old enough to marry, regardless of how long they have been married by that point.

We also found evidence that old norms and new norms are working in tandem to support child marriage. In regards to the former, the more rural respondents in our second year of research told us that even outside of bride trafficking to China[6], forcible bride kidnapping, like child marriage, is far less rare in remote areas than previous research had suggested (see T.H. Nguyen, 2011). The youngest, poorest girls were the most likely to be victimised and none felt that once kidnapped they could leave. Even if they knew that kidnapping was illegal, which was rare, they felt that if they left they would be seen by the broader community as already married—and thus unmarriageable. We also uncovered some evidence that increasing school enrolment is encouraging child marriage, as girls and boys are, for the first time, in age-segregated classrooms and have an opportunity to fall in "love" with one another. Several respondents told us that some couples, driven by adolescent biological imperatives, marry as soon as they have finished 9th grade (at 14 or 15 years of age).

2.5.6 Fertility: limited information, limited options

Academic reports of traditional sexual freedom notwithstanding (see Lemoine, 2012), our previous respondents were clear that sexual contact before marriage is deeply taboo within their Hmong community – with both information and contraception accordingly limited (see also Teerawichitchainan et al. 2007; Vang and Bogenschutz, 2011). To a large extent these attitudes align closely with those found in the broader Vietnamese culture, where, while 'data indicate that premarital sexual relationships have increased in Vietnam over the past decade' (Kaljee et al., 2011: 269; see also Hong et al., 2009; Pham et al., 2012), adults remain concerned about offering sexuality-related education because they believe they should not 'show the ways for the deer to run'

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6 Anecdotes from our first year girls—as well as a variety of new sources—suggest that the trafficking of Hmong girls to China is increasingly commonplace as a result of the one-child policy and its impacts on sex ratios. See, for example: http://latterlymagazine.com/stolen-to-china/

(Hong et al., 2009). Accordingly, most sex-related parent–child communication in Viet Nam is limited to simple messages such as 'no sex' and 'no boy/girlfriends until schooling is complete' (Hong et al., 2009; Pham et al., 2012). Similarly, classes at school are 'traditional with imposing messages', which make 'young people feel embarrassed' and tend to bury sexuality itself under other content, such as biology or population (WGNRR, 2012; see also Hong et al., 2009).

Amongst our previous study participants, even these messages were largely absent. Girls were rarely even told by their mothers to expect their periods, let alone about reproduction. Few girls reported any sexuality-related education at school and most, when they could bring themselves to discuss it all, said their information came from their peers. All of our study participants, adults and adolescents, girls and boys, noted that an out-of-wedlock pregnancy would be deeply shameful, though a key informant noted that it would also be easily addressed by following Hmong custom and allowing the errant children to marry. This fits with the observations of both Lemoine (2012) and T.H. Nguyen et al. (2011), who reported that giving birth before marriage is considered a cultural anathema because it would necessarily take place in a girl's natal household, angering the spirits of her ancestors.

While T.H. Nguyen et al. (2011) report that Hmong girls near Meo Vac town 'had quite a good understanding about condoms, pills, the intra-uterine device (coil), calculating their menstrual cycle and even vasectomies' because they were able to obtain information 'from the Internet, television, newspapers, books and friends' (p. 209), we found, amongst our previous study participants, that unmarried adolescents had essentially no knowledge about the practicalities of contraception. We also found that despite heavy messaging about limiting family size, adolescents in more remote communities were often still quite committed to the larger families that would support both crop and son production.

2.5.7 Gender-based violence: endemic, even when not reported
Gender-based violence is very common in Viet Nam. A recent government survey on domestic violence found that nearly 60% of ever-married Vietnamese women had experienced at least one form of domestic violence: one-half reported emotional violence, one-third reported physical violence and one-tenth reported sexual violence (GSO, 2010b). These numbers match those of Nanda et al. (2012), who found that 60% of Vietnamese men admitted using some form of violence against their intimate partner – and that 'in Vietnam 90 percent men agreed that to be a man you need to be tough' (p.2). Interestingly, in large scale national surveys minority women were less likely than majority women to report domestic abuse – although this may of course reflect cultural sensibilities more than violence rates *per se* (Rasanathan and Bhushan, 2011).

Participants in our earlier research suggest the accuracy of this assumption. While many mothers were loath to discuss the specifics of their own situations, girls and key informants reported endemic, alcohol-fuelled gender-based violence directed at wives. Indeed, girls in our second round of research admitted that a key driver of partner selection was finding a boy who did not drink.

Divorce is not traditionally an option for Hmong women. In part this is due to economic reality, as women's natal families often lack sufficient food to feed another mouth. In large part, however, it is the result of culture, as women become so thoroughly a part of their husband's clan upon marriage that they are told 'your mother's womb is what you borrowed' (Lemoine, 2012: 16; see also Moua, 2003). Indeed, because the institution of marriage has been seen historically as crucial to maintaining clan ties and is 'valued as more important than physical and emotional safety in an abusive relationships', even women genuinely at risk have no recourse (Lee and Tapp, 2010: 159; see also Jones et al., 2015).

3 Policy and programming landscape overview

The policy environment which shapes Hmong girls' lives is mixed (see Annex 4 for details). On the one hand, the Vietnamese government is highly committed to gender equality – especially in regard to women's public roles – and has dedicated considerable resources to improving the lives of minority populations. On the other hand, we were not able to identify a single core policy which directly addresses social norms and there appears to be little attempt to integrate policy and programming aimed at gender inequality with that aimed at ethnic inequality.

Viet Nam is a regional leader in terms of policy aimed at gender equality. It has a wide range of laws and policies aimed not only at ensuring the equal treatment of women and men and girls and boys in the public sphere, but at reducing differences in access to opportunities and decision-making in the private sphere. These policies, which include the Marriage Law, the Family Development Strategy, the Gender Equality Law, the National Strategy on Gender Equality, The Law on Domestic Violence Prevention, the Youth Law and the Law on Protection, Care and Education of Children, address a wide range of threats to which girls and women are especially susceptible. For example, the Law on Gender Equality calls for sons and daughters to be cared for equally and to have equal access to education. Similarly, as noted previously, the Marriage Law prohibits both marriage by abduction and the marriage of girls under the age of 18. On the other hand, the repeated emphasis of policy documents on the family as the 'key space to maintain and promote good cultural traditions'[7] has had the inadvertent effect of reinforcing women's domestic responsibilities. Pronounced 'the soul of the family' (Werner, 2008: 75) with their domestic role the 'mythic locus of traditional cultural values' (Leshkowich, 2008: 15), women have maintained responsibility for nearly all household and care-related work – even though they have entered the work force in greater numbers and the wage gap has dropped.

Viet Nam also has a strong platform of policy and programming aimed at remediating ethnic minority disadvantage—primarily through raising living standards and "modernising" lifestyles. The 2011 Decree on Ethnic Affairs, for example, recognises the importance of ethnic identity and prohibits acts of stigmatisation and discrimination towards ethnicity (Article 7). It also calls for the support of minority languages and the prioritisation of minority cadres in political offices. Similarly, Programmes 134, 135 and 30a have prioritised areas with high minority populations for improvements in transportation, health, education and power infrastructure—although as noted earlier not all improvements are especially accessible by minorities living in the most remote areas. Minority children are also prioritised under law. For instance, the Law on Education and the National Targeted Programme on Education not only provide for boarding schools solely for minority children (including both boarding secondary schools as well comparatively new "semi-boarding schools" for younger students), but provide fee exemptions for most disadvantaged minority children. Hmong children are exempt from nearly all tuition and fees.[8] On the other hand, the 'selective cultural preservation policy'[9], adopted by the Vietnamese government nearly four decades ago and never revoked, has helped foster a widespread belief that highland minorities in particular are 'backwards' (see also Turner, 2012a, 2012b). While Hmong customs such as forcible bride-kidnapping and consanguineous marriage are antithetical to the development goals of not just the Vietnamese government but the international community, the degree to which many Hmong identify their ethnic group as

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7 Family Development Strategy, p.1
8 Note that this does not make high school either free – or affordable. Where students must rent lodgings and provide their own food, schooling remains an expensive proposition.
9 The 'selective cultural preservation policy' prohibits the 'counter-productive' and 'superstitious practices' of ethnic minorities (Michaud, 2010: 32; see also McElwee, 2004; Messier and Michaud, 2012).

'silly', 'backwards', 'ignorant', 'unknowledgeable', 'unable to learn anything', 'superstitious' and 'unable to listen' surely complicates discourse (Jones et al., 2014: 63).

While the policy and programming environment for gender and ethnicity is strong in Viet Nam, there are considerable gaps that are in need of remedy if equity is to be achieved. First, there is little integration of the two policy domains. While there are occasional mentions of ethnicity in documents related to gender, and vice versa, the language tends to be formal with little attention paid to how they might be implemented – or even how they might be contextualised to meet local needs. Indeed, at a national level this is further exacerbated by a dearth of disaggregated data by ethnic minority group[10] to support evidence-informed programming and the acute siloing of agencies who could potentially support Hmong adolescent girls' wellbeing. For example, there seems to be very limited substantive interaction with regard to minority adolescent girls between the Department of Ethnic Minority Education in the Ministry of Education and the Departments of Social Protection, Gender Equality and Child Protection in the Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs, even though their mandates overlap and intersect considerably. Moreover, the Department of Child Protection and the Department of Social Protection are developing national databases on children as part of a broader initiative to expand the country's social welfare system, but as yet there are no initiatives to ensure that these are aligned (see further discussion in Recommendations, Section 6).

Furthermore, despite the growing consensus that tackling social norms is key to altering girls' trajectories in terms of outcomes such early marriage and education, Vietnamese policy documents are silent in this regard. There are, in the documents we reviewed, few mentions of stereotypes, attitudes or social practices of any kind and the only norms mentioned are legal ones (in the Marriage Law). For example, while the Law on Gender Equality prohibits families from allocating property or work on the basis of gender, it directs no attention to how this might be accomplished or enforced. Similarly, while the National Strategy on Gender Equality calls for boosting 'propaganda on mass media in order to raise awareness on female cadres, helping in deleting gender stereotypes and inappropriate perceptions of women's and men's role in the family and society' (pp. 6-12), the language relates solely on top-down efforts to disseminate policy rather than any attempt to engage in the genuine dialogues that research suggests are needed to facilitate norm change.

Despite the gaps, Viet Nam is ultimately well positioned to rapidly improve the capabilities of Hmong adolescent girls. First, there is a growing national consensus that further progress towards development goals will require more direct targeting of the most marginalised – who, as noted above, have fallen further behind in recent years. This is highlighted by the 2013 Strategy on Ethnic Affairs (Decision 449/QD-TTg), the establishment of a new government-donor working group on Ethnic Minority Affairs, and UN Viet Nam's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Acceleration Programme – which is focusing on how the underachievement of MDGs among the poorest and most excluded can be more effectively tackled. Second, because the Vietnamese government controls not only the law but also social messaging, it is nearly unique in terms of both its scope and its reach. While not guaranteeing 100% compliance, the penetration of the government into all areas of life – through mass organisations such as the Women's Union and the Youth Union, through the school curriculum and through mandatory village meetings – give it a unique ability to quickly alter behaviour, attitudes and norms. The end result of this nexus is that while Hmong girls continue to face myriad disadvantages that work to restrict their futures to marriage and motherhood, the ability of the Vietnamese state to effect top-down change – which is rarely seen in more democratic environments – holds considerable promise for transformational change.

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10 Due in large part to the reality that ethnic minority groups, even the larger ones such as the Hmong, represent a small proportion of the Vietnamese population – very little disaggregated data is available. In the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey (GSO, 2012a), for example, educational and health statistics are reported by ethnicity, but economic activity and monthly income are not. More specialised surveys are especially unlikely to disaggregate by ethnicity. The Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth, a key tool for exploring the lives of adolescents and young adults, the National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Viet Nam, and the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, for example, report no data by ethnicity

4 Case Study: Plan's Because I am a girl

Plan's *Because I am a girl* (BIAAG) aims to reach 4 million girls in developing countries around the world, helping them to complete their high school educations, avoid child marriage, reduce their exposure to gender-based violence and strengthen their access to decision-making (Plan, 2015a). Launched in 2011 in Ha Giang province (see Box 4), and building on more than two decades of work in Viet Nam, Plan's BIAAG is taking a community development approach, supporting initiatives aimed at maternal health, sanitation, education and gender equality.

BIAAG is the only project we were able to locate specifically aimed at improving Hmong girls' educations and reducing their odds of child marriage.

Box 4: Programme site overview

Ha Giang province has a total population of over 700,000 people and an official poverty rate of nearly 40% (GSO, 2012a). According to the 2011 Viet Nam Human Development Report, nearly three-quarters of Ha Giang's population experiences multi-dimensional poverty, meaning it is the third poorest province in the country.

Plan's BIAAG is working in two districts in Ha Giang: Yen Minh and Meo Vac. Meo Vac is regarded as the Hmong homeland and had a poverty rate of over 40% in 2014.

Within Meo Vac the programme is working in four communes, including Can Chu Phin. Can Chu Phin, which is home to 5,000 people living in 12 villages (only three of which have electricity), had an official poverty rate of 44% in 2014 – down from 50% in 2013 in large part because of the way in which poverty rates are declared on the basis of political targets.

4.1 Project goals and modalities

Recognising that Hmong girls are deeply constrained by both their gender and their age, the confluence of which leaves them effectively invisible, BIAAG is aimed at supporting girls' comprehensive development by providing safe spaces and gender rights education for girls, and developing their broader communities in ways which improve health and education more generally (Plan, 2015b).

As shown in Figure 7, Plan built its programming around a solid understanding, developed through a baseline study, of the specific vulnerabilities that Meo Vac's Hmong population faces – including geographic isolation, lack of water and poor educational infrastructure. It has also taken into account the gender inequalities which specifically disadvantage girls and women, leaving them socially isolated, less likely to be schooled and vulnerable to forced and child marriage. BIAAG attempts to address many of these ethnic and gender specific disadvantages.

Figure 6: Situation in Meo Vac
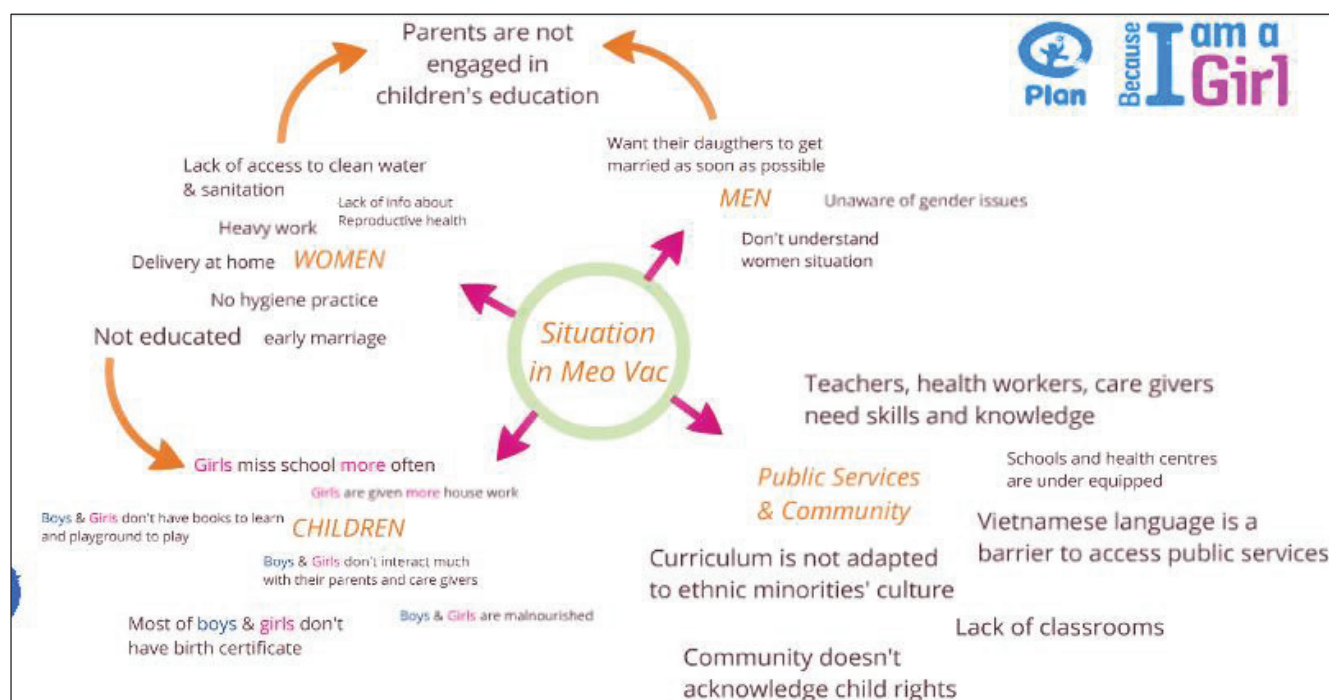
The specific objectives of BIAAG in Ha Giang are (Plan, 2014):

1. Ethnic minority girls, young women and men will have access to better nutrition and safe maternal health services.
   a. Girls and women feel confident to use SRH services.
   b. Parents are aware of safe nutritional care for mothers and under-fives.
   c. Sanitation and hygiene in ethnic minority communities is improved.
   d. Child development outcomes of ethnic minority children are improved.
2. Ethnic minority girls are supported to receive better education.
   a. The availability of and access to quality childcare is increased.
   b. The availability of and access to quality education is increased.
   c. Education services are better able to meet the learning needs of ethnic minority children and promote improved Vietnamese language skills
3. Ethnic minority girls are protected from child marriage.
   a. Safe spaces for girls are established and maintained.
   b. Local stakeholders are aware of and take action to support girls and boys to postpone marriage.
   c. Children who are at risk of marriage and young married couples receive support to ensure their well-being.
   d. Steering committees are established in eight pilot communes to identify and respond to children at risk of early marriage.
4. Community planning processes reflect the priorities of ethnic minority girls and women.
5. Communes follow practices which promote safe sanitation and hygiene.

4.2 Internal evaluation

Plan's mid-term review, conducted in mid-2014, included both a desk study of local documentation and qualitative research with a handful of stakeholders and beneficiaries (Plan, 2014). It found that BIAAG had already reached

56,000 people – 95% of whom were Hmong and 70% of whom were poor. About 60% of project beneficiaries were children and about 40% were adults, and approximately half of each of these were female.

The mid-term review noted a number of key caveats. First, Hmong adults often speak very little Vietnamese and while translation was provided, the researchers noted that 'sometimes the translation was influenced by their personal opinion; the content of translation was inadequate' (Plan, 2014: 7). They specifically noted that this was likely to bias the results of the qualitative evaluation. Second, the fact that the evaluation was completed with significantly reduced access to stakeholders and participants was also an important concern. Because it was the rainy season, many adults were working in the fields and because it was summer vacation, many teachers had returned to the lowland.

That said, the evaluation was overall very positive. Selected outcomes, broken down by goal, are presented below:

Goal 1: Improve maternity care and nutrition

The review noted that while training has been provided to local health providers, Hmong women's uptake of delivery services remains very low due to cultural constraints. They are shy, speak only Hmong and must give birth at home. Feeding practices are also sharply limited by custom and poverty. Hmong women work in the fields and infants are cared for by their siblings, which reduces breastfeeding opportunities.

Goal 2: Ethnic minority children receive better education

The review noted that hundreds of young children are now being served by play and literacy groups, primary school enrolment was approaching 100% and the educational opportunities of local children are much improved, with schools in project communes having better infrastructure, more modern teaching methods and more 'fearless' students. Parents' awareness of the importance of education – especially for girls – was markedly better.

Goal 3: Protect girls from child marriage

- Established at least one girls' club in each of eight communes. Each serves 20-30 adolescent girls – for a total of over 500 girls.
- Trained 240 girls in how to protect themselves from early marriage.
- Exposed 850 participants to information about child rights in events held in commune centres on the International Day of the Girl.
- Integrated training on child marriage into meetings in 16 villages and exposed nearly 3,500 villagers to media activities about child marriage.
- Advised 240 child couples on contraception.
- Assisted all communes in establishing committees to monitor children at risk of marriage.

Although rates of child marriage are apparently dropping in project areas, the review notes that social norms are very powerful and that monitoring is complicated by the reality that people simply do not report their marriages. That said, girls' awareness of the risks of early marriage – and their right to not engage in it – have been increasing in tandem with their desire to stay in school. School-based approaches to programming, however, mean that out-of-school girls are missed entirely.

Goal 4: Community planning reflects the needs of ethnic minority girls and women

This goal is meant to be integrated across the first three goals. The overall conclusion of the review is that girls and women are rarely included in any planning activities – with children 'not encouraged to express their opinions' to either leaders or parents (p.27).

Goal 5: Improve sanitation and hygiene at the commune level

The review concluded that although hygienic practices are new to the Hmong community, uptake is good – with girls particularly enthused about sanitary supplies, as these are effectively new to them.

The mid-term review identified two key issues with the Vietnamese application of BIAAG – one related to programming and the other to outcomes. First, while the community development approach is working well, it needs to be coupled with more activities that are aimed directly at children, especially girls. Second, Hmong girls' and women's opportunities and outcomes are extremely limited by social norms that will require a great deal of time to shift. They are burdened with over-sized workloads, are seen as less valuable than boys and men because they ultimately 'belong' to their husband's family, are discouraged from having, much less voicing, their own opinions and are extremely difficult to target with programming given that it is men who are expected to attend meetings while women and girls stay home to work. Despite very low levels of community awareness in terms of gender inequality, girls' educational opportunities are beginning to expand, especially – due to Plan's efforts – at lower levels. Child marriage, on the other hand, held in place by arranged marriages and forcible kidnapping, is proving harder to target.

4.3 Primary research findings

Our primary research found BIAAG has been very comprehensive in its approach. As noted by a key informant (KI) on the People's Committee,[11] it has built schools and water filtration systems – universally well received by the community – and organised painting and drawing activities for children. A KI at the Department of Education and Training (DOET) added that Plan has 'supported professional activities, and organised training courses', especially for nursery and primary teachers. That said, it was very clear from our respondents that while Plan's long-term objectives are to keep girls in school and reduce their odds of child marriage, in Can Chu Phin, girls themselves were effectively lost in Plan's community development strategy. Officials emphasised the project's investment in infrastructure, rather than in the development of people, and parents prioritised soap over rights.

'I want to marry a boy from Kinh ethnic group, because both my husband and I will have employment. Generally Hmong people are unhappy. They work on the field throughout all four seasons, all day long. Kinh people have high education, employment, salary, so their lives are not unhappy'

(14-year-old girl)

Respondents were only aware of three of Plan's many girl-promoting activities – and only one, girls' clubs, had any significant impact. Plan's girls' clubs have been highly successful. It is clear from talking to girls and their brothers that the clubs have stretched girls in ways that were unimaginable to them three years ago – several, for example, have set their sights on high school. That said, because Plan is not reaching girls with clubs at scale, there is considerable scope for improvement if it is to meet the BIAAG objectives. Indeed, its other two girl-promoting activities – child rights education for parents and community education on child marriage – appear to have gone almost entirely unnoticed by their intended recipients. Moreover, although Can Chu Phin has seen recent improvements in girls' education and recent reductions in child marriage, already existing local initiatives appear to have been responsible for most of these advances.

Figure 7: BIAAG girls' club

Similarly, while the child protection board that Plan helped establish – which offers girls legal protection from early marriage – shows tremendous promise, especially in terms of returning child brides to their parents in the early days of marriage, it does not appear to be well integrated with local programming. Indeed, key informants did not acknowledge its existence.

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11 The People's Committee is the executive branch of local government

4.3.1 Programme strengths

Plan has one principal child-centred activity directed at preventing early marriage: girls' clubs. Unfortunately, while the curriculum is effective, their methods largely appropriate, particularly for the youngest girls, and their outcomes nearly uniformly positive, the scope and targeting of the clubs has significantly limited their impact. In Can Chu Phin commune there are only two clubs: one for the girls of a single village and one for girls at the lower secondary school. Each has a maximum capacity of 30 girls.

4.3.1.1 Girls' clubs

Can Chu Phin has 12 villages. One has a girls' club, which meets once a month for two hours, has 25 members – all in mid to late adolescence – and is led by an enthusiastic man who was assigned by the commune to head Plan's child protection team. Girls in the other villages have expressed interest in a club of their own, but Plan and the commune have been unable to find adults with the time, interest and capacity to facilitate clubs in other locations. Adults in general have very little time, given the necessity of constant agricultural work, and the few educated adults are already burdened with official tasks. As this village-based club is the only club with the potential to serve out-of-school girls (which, given that no girls in Can Chu Phin attend high school yet, means *all* girls over the age of about 15), the most vulnerable have effectively been shut out of programming entirely. It is also worth noting that while the main leader[12] is very much respected by participant girls, it is likely that the fact that he is a man limits what types of questions girls are willing to ask.

Figure 8: A classroom in Can Chu Phin

Can Chu Phin's school-based girls' club meets twice a month at the lower-secondary school and is facilitated by teachers. Its 30 girls, all young adolescents, were chosen by teachers – who, as they were offered no guidance from Plan as to how they must select participants – chose girls who were either ranked 'excellent' in terms of academic performance or who held classroom monitor positions. These girls, according to a 14-year-old participant, are meant to communicate 'back to their classes, saying don't get married early; if you get married early, when you have children, your children will have defects, they will be rickety and malnourished', But the selection process has meant, according to KIs, that those likely the most vulnerable to child marriage are not the primary recipients of the messages. One KI noted that if they had funding then they could double the number of girls served immediately – significantly strengthening their impact.

The two girls' clubs have similar messages, which, based on our respondents' answers, primarily revolve around the health risks to the babies born to young mothers, especially those born to parents who are first cousins. Several girls, however, mentioned other child marriage messages. One girl, in a focus group discussion (FGD), mentioned that child marriage was associated with poverty. She explained, 'If you get married at the mature age, you will be able to raise your babies in better conditions. You will have a better future. That time, both husband and wife will have employment and better income.' Another girl, 19 and in the village club, pointed out that child brides, who as Hmong daughters-in-law are the most overworked, are at risk of ill-health themselves. She said, 'As for how to work, she won't have enough strength for hard work. Maybe she even won't be able to carry a water bucket. If she gets married early, she will be sickly, skinny, and pale.' Only two girls, one 14 and in the commune club and one 19 and in the village club, talked about rights-based, rather than fear-based, framing. The older girls said, 'I

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12 The head of the local Women's Union is a co-facilitator, but she is so busy that she rarely gets to come to meetings. Several of the girls indicated that she had attended only once or twice

like best the activity where Mr. Vang[13] talks about girls' rights. I like that. Because he said that as a girl, I have this right and that right, so I like it. Right to freedom of love'.

The methods of the two clubs are also broadly similar – though those used by the school-based club appear to be more generally playful and participatory, reflecting both the younger ages of the girls in that club as well as the reality that the older girls in the village club tend to be exhausted by their workloads and more generally focused on economic survival. The Youth Union KI explained that the clubs try hard to build trust between girls and leaders, encouraging 'them to talk as if we're sisters in a family, not teachers and pupils'. In addition to question and answer sessions, which she admitted are not very popular with the girls, in part because the lessons tend to be a 'bit abstract', the club also uses video presentations to 'show images of stunted and undersized children' and a wide array of role plays, games, competitions and dramas (see Box 5). It is these latter activities, she observed, that help girls become more self-confident and the dramas and role plays, in particular, that let them practice the skills and try out the language they may ultimately need to protect themselves from child marriage. She explained that in the role play, 'we drew a conclusion that they must communicate this [to the parents]: "I must go to school, I'm not old enough to get married, getting married means violating the law". The pupils are aware'.

Box 5: Plan's girl club through the eyes of a participant

Vuong Do Va is a 15-year-old tenth grade student at Meo Vac's high school. While she is not from Can Chu Phin, she participated in Plan's girls' club in a neighbouring commune for several years and feels that it was instrumental in helping her reach high school. While Va liked the 'dancing, singing and playing', her two favourite activities were the quiz bowl and drama.

In the quiz bowl, 'Four commune teams competed with each other.' Va continued, 'First they presented the questions, then they gave us a board and chalks, we wrote our answers there. For the quiz, they gave us answers in advance and we learnt by heart. Such questions as what is child marriage, what is 'near blood' [consanguineous marriage], what are the consequences of early marriage, and many other questions about family and early marriage.'

For the drama, Va explained, 'I and some friend wrote the script, then we cast roles and rehearsed.' It was 'about some school children and Mai was one among them. There were five characters in the drama, including Mai's father, mother, a commune officer, Mai's friends and character Mai. Mai's mother didn't allow Mai to go to school, telling her to get married early. Mai's father said that he would beat her if she didn't return home. The commune officer told her father that if he didn't allow his daughter to go to school, the commune authority would cut back all support. And Mai's friends talked with him about consequences of early marriage. Finally Mai's father allowed her to go to school.'

While noting that several of the girls in the village club have apparently already dropped out because they do not have the time to play games, the girls we interviewed were uniformly positive about their experiences. Indeed, one young woman, 19 and in the village club, wished that the club, rather than meeting once a month for a few hours, met every week for the whole day – and that her 13-year-old sister could come too. Overall, participant school girls noted that club involvement had increased their commitment to remaining in school and girls in both clubs felt that it had made them more determined to delay marriage, improved their confidence and ability to communicate with their family members, enlarged their social circles and allowed them time to rest and to see themselves for the first time as individuals. While noting that the girls chosen to participate in the school-based club represent the 'cream of the crop' of young adolescent girls, and also that the commune has a broad array of local initiatives aimed at encouraging education and discouraging child marriage (discussed below), our research suggests that it is club participation that has served as the primary catalyst for the internal change experienced by individual girls.

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13 Mr Vang is the enthusiastic man who leads the village-based club

Impact: Commitment to education

Our respondents, girls, their brothers and their mothers, reported that BIAAG club involvement had improved younger girls' interest in and commitment to education. Girls are more interested in attending school, more interested in performing well, more active in the classroom and have higher educational aspirations. 'Before joining the club, I went to school or didn't go to school at will,' explained a girl in a FGD, 'now I don't want to be absent'. A 14 year old added, 'In the past, I thought that I would finish grade 9 only. Now I want to finish grade 12. Before joining the club, I thought I might go back and work in the fields; but after that, maybe I want to study further.' Girls' families also feel the changes in girls' aspirations. An older brother noted, 'She also tries harder to study, saying that excellent achievements in school can help her to be employed'. Similarly, a mother observed that her daughter was no longer willing to stay home and help with housework, she 'told me and my husband to try to provide for her to go to school, otherwise her life would be hard'.

'I want to study pedagogy and become a history teacher, and I will teach my pupils about periods of resistance.' (14-year-old girl)

'I want to finish grade 12, and then take the university entrance exams.' (15-year-old girl)

Until about five years ago, most children left school after fifth grade. Since then, however, there has been a tremendous local effort, coupling communication with heavy fines and investment in educational infrastructure, to ensure that all children stay in school through the ninth grade[14]. While some, almost exclusively girls, continue to fall through the cracks – like the younger sisters of a 19-year-old club participant who have never been to school at all and the few that the Women's Union KI says leave school early in order to marry – most children now complete lower secondary school. That said, few of Can Chu Phin's students – and none of its girls, according to the KI at the Women's Union – go on to high school. Given this reality, it was notable that all of the lower-secondary aged girls in our

Figure 9: Young adolescent girl in Can Chu Phin

research wanted to continue on to high school. While the vast majority were clear that it would never happen because high school is too expensive and their families too poor, the aspirations held by girls appear to have been rapidly shifted by their club participation, which exposed them to the idea that tertiary education and professional careers were possible, even for Hmong girls.

Impact: Resistance to child marriage

A few of the girls we interviewed also noted that club participation had changed their aspirations regarding marriage age. Although Can Chu Phin has been working for several years to reduce child marriage, coupling communication and the threat of fines, it is clear from our research that while child marriage is becoming less common, it has not only not been eliminated, but is still seen – despite being illegal – as somewhat 'normal'. Plan's girls' club has helped several girls reframe 'normal' for themselves. For example, a 14 year old in the commune club explained, 'Hmong people are not like Kinh people; we think we will get married at 17. But since I joined the club, I think that I will try to study to become a teacher, and only get married when I'm 20 years old.' Another, also 14, added 'Back then, some older girls got married at 16. I thought like that, but now I've learnt. I see that getting married like that is very harmful'.

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14 As noted above, the national commitment to achieve universal lower-secondary education is likely behind these local efforts

Impact: Increasing confidence and sense of self

All of our respondents agreed that club participation had helped girls – most especially the younger girls--become more confident, 'speaking and smiling more than before' (mother in FGD). While Plan's mid-term review rightly argued that more attention should have been paid to participatory activities for children, the games and contests and chances to practice speaking up that were afforded had powerful impacts on girls. One 14 year old noted, 'I don't hesitate to contact strange people. I am not shy when answering interviewer's questions. We are encouraged to speak out.' Another added, 'I've become more confident, less shy. In the past when I met strangers, I was very nervous. Now I feel it's normal.'

This confidence has impacted all elements of girls' lives. They are telling their brothers 'that girls also have the right to go to school' and arguing back when they are told they won't do well there (14-year-old girl). They are 'taking the initiative to make friends', acting 'like normal' until their shyer friends 'were not shy anymore' (14-year-old girl). They are not only talking to their parents more, telling them 'about funny stories I have learnt at the school' or 'about my participation in the girl's club, playing games and singing', but some feel close enough to their mothers to begin setting limits about how hard and long they are able to work. One 18 year old in the village club said, 'I told [my mother], when I came back from the club, that I would not work beyond my strength. They teach me to do good things for myself.'

Some girls, marshalling their improved confidence and communication skills, are also beginning to carve out places for themselves in the larger community. A 14 year old, for example, noted that she had talked a friend into not dropping out of school. On her own initiative, she 'called on other friends to go there. Each of us gave an advice and the friend listened to us'. Another young woman, 19 and recently married against her will to a childhood friend who kidnapped her, is so taken with the messages that she's heard in Plan's village club that she would like to do early marriage communication herself. Noting that she now has to ask her husband's permission before she attends meetings, she added that he is a big supporter and believes that she can make a difference to the club because her language skills are good. 'My husband said that…there are people who don't go to school and don't know how to read or write: I can communicate to them, I can translate for them,' she explained.

4.3.1.2 Child protection board
Plan also helped Can Chu Phin establish a child protection board. This board, when it learns of a child marriage, goes directly to the home of groom, cancels the marriage by sending the girl child home to her own parents, and 'encourages' the parents of the boy child to sign a document pledging that they will not let their son marry an underage girl (see Box 6).

Box 6: Can Chu Phin's crackdown on child marriage

Two of our respondents shared a story about child marriage. One was Mai, a 16-year-old girl who had very nearly been married off and who was not part of a Plan club. The other was her very-nearly mother-in-law, Mrs Vu. The child protection board that Plan helped establish prevented the marriage.

Mrs Vu reported that her son kidnapped Mai while she was 'hanging around'. She added, 'I didn't want them to get married, but he kidnapped her and brought her home, so I was unable to do anything.' The very next day, 'the child protection board intervened'. 'The commune and hamlet officers came and…we were invited to sign on a commitment paper promising to return Mai to her family and keep our son from marrying too young'. Now Mai 'is studying at school.'

Mai is one of four children – the youngest of whom is severely disabled. Her father is ill and no longer able to work, her mother works in the fields and her older brothers both work for wages in China. Although she is back in school now that her marriage was called off, she says that she barely sees the difference. She does not understand Vietnamese well enough to follow her classes, has no time to do homework because of the amount of work she must do at home, and plans to leave school immediately after ninth grade. She has no friends and wants only 'for girls to work less' and 'support for when I'm worried' because 'I don't tell anyone anything'.

4.3.2 Missed opportunities

4.3.2.1 Brothers

An opportunity that Plan's child-centred programming has missed is using brothers to leverage new futures for girls. The older adolescent boys in our research, all of whom had younger sisters who were participating in Plan's girls' clubs, felt this gap acutely. While still bound by Hmong normative frameworks, they recognised – between their generation and that of their parents – a clear line between 'old' and 'modern'. They showed commitment to their sisters as individuals with their own aspirations for the future, were cognisant of the daily injustices under which their sisters laboured solely because they were girls, and wanted more information to help push their parents into the future.

Figure 10: Older Hmong girl weaving

The brothers we interviewed were clear that education is a right that is 'very important for human beings'. They knew that their sisters wanted to study and that 'their parents don't let them do it' because 'their parents force them to work for them'. They thought it was unfair that parents 'tell the boys to go to school, [while] the girls are told to finish grade 9 only'.

Even more telling (and evident in the other research sites as well) was that) the boys did not support the girl-centred approach taken by Plan's child marriage programming – since marriage in the Hmong community is always initiated by boys. One explained, 'Child marriage takes place when the boy kidnaps the bride, so communication work should target the boy to convince him not to get married early, so that he will have better understanding. If the boy no longer kidnaps the bride, there won't be any child marriage; it is all caused by the boy.' While some acknowledged that only 'unknowledgeable people follow the custom of child marriage', because it also benefits boys to 'get married with the girl of mature age who can care for children' and 'think and do business', boys have been overlooked by current communication efforts. One brother emphasised that 'the boys should know what the girls know', and another observed that his only exposure to messages broader than the law came through his younger sister. 'I knew it before,' he said, 'but the more I listen to her, the more I understand it better.'

'Hmong girls have all the rights of any girl, but the guys and parents don't follow. If they want us to get married, we have to. The guys don't get to learn [this], so they don't understand, they still kidnap [girls] like usual. If he wants to marry [someone], he will never listen.'

(19-year-old girl in village club)

As well as highlighting that boys drive child marriage and are therefore critical to ending it, the brothers in our research also noted that they play a critical role in helping their parents break with the past because, explained one, 'we listen to parents, but only listen to the right thing'. A boy explained, 'We tell parents everything, but we also warn parents. I tell them that if a couple gets married before the age of 18, if they are from the same family line, the baby born to them will be deformed; if you get married early, the baby born to you won't be healthy or will be at high risk of mortality'. Another added, 'We can advise parents. We have learnt about the law on child marriage, so we can persuade parents'.

4.3.2.2 Insufficient engagement with parents

Plan's girl-promoting programming had very little interface with parents in the commune. The fathers in our FGD were unaware as to what their daughters were doing in the club, outside of learning about soap and being offered candy. The mothers in our FGD, despite girls' claims that they were telling them everything, seem to have an only slightly broader perspective. They also knew their daughters had access to sanitary supplies and were being taught about menstrual hygiene. Parents were proud of their daughters for being in the club, they were happy to have

their daughters in the club and were willing to give them time off to participate – but they expressed no understanding of what exactly there girls were *learning* in the club.

Only one parent mentioned having been exposed to child rights through Plan: this may have been at the festival that the commune held, with Plan support, on the International Day of the Girl. The concept was so foreign to her, given that Hmong families primarily see their older children as a source of labour, that she did not even know how to conceptualise what child rights for older children might look like. She explained, 'Children may have many rights but I don't know. You should care for small children, but big children should take care of themselves'.

4.3.2.3 Insufficient engagement with leaders and local programming

Plan's lack of girl-promoting programming for local leaders seems especially problematic given how hard commune officials have worked the last several years to improve the educational situation and reduce child marriage. Already strong legal messages could have been transformed with moderate effort into rights-based messages that could have extended parents' thinking about their older children. Instead, while Plan provided some training to the Youth Union and Women's Unions officials who were responsible for the girls' clubs and the Festival for Girls' Day, they appear to have made no effort to systemically liaise with the justice officials who have primary responsibility for child marriage – even in regard to the child protection board. Indeed, while it is clear that the child protection board can be an effective tool for preventing child marriage, not a single key informant mentioned its existence.

Can Chu Phin's proactive implementation of education and early marriage-related policies seem to have made very solid in-roads in changing behaviours over the last several years and are therefore worth detailing. Progress is especially impressive because there are very few Kinh officials in the commune, meaning that Hmong authorities are shaping and enforcing the policies that are driving change, therefore reinforcing local ownership.

There are two commune-level activities aimed at encouraging children to complete ninth grade. First is a dual-pronged communication effort aimed at both parents and children. Commune officials are working hard to teach parents that while their lives are hard, those of their children can be easier. Recognising that exhausted, labour-constrained parents may be less receptive to messaging than their children, the Women's Union is also advising children to politely talk back to their parents. This is the first time in our work in Meo Vac that we have heard of this approach. The KI explained, 'I advise the children to tell their parents like this: "Mum, Dad, you didn't have the chance to be educated, so I should study, children should have better education than parents, so that in the future I will go to study in the district capital, after the upper secondary school I will enter university if I wish to".' The fact that most girls seem to regard leaving school at the end of ninth grade as a *fait accompli* suggests that many have not yet heard these messages. On the other hand, conversations with their brothers suggest that for boys the impact of parental demands may be weakening as 'the society is getting more modern and people are more knowledgeable' (boy in FGD).

Pursuant to the national goal of universal lower-secondary school, the commune also has a system of fines that appears to be highly effective in terms of keeping children in school. Fine amounts are set by the villages themselves and range from 100,000 dong a day ($4.60) to 300,000 dong a day. For children who drop out entirely, parents report that the fine is 3 million dong. Parents clearly understand and respond to fines. One mother reported, 'In the past there was no convention to impose fines, but now people are afraid of the fine, so they send their children to school regularly.' A father in an FGD further explained that even more than the monetary cost, being fined was very shameful, 'If we're punished, we'll be very embarrassed.' Besides, he added, 'I'm also afraid my child will be worse than her friends. If she stops for a while before going back to school, she won't catch up to those who stay in school.'

Figure 11: Young Hmong mother and her son

As noted in our previous research, higher levels of government are also working to improve uptake of education. In addition to new lower-secondary schools, which reduce daily travel time for most and offer nutritious meals and socialisation to the semi-boarding students who stay for the week, Hmong high school students are also supported with cash and rice. Several KIs and the vast majority of parents and children are clear, however, that this support is not enough – especially given that Hmong families have liquidity issues related to their agricultural reality. 'People here generally don't have any job to do, they just rely on the corn harvest; if they don't have anything to sell, children don't have money to pay for education,' explained a KI from the Women's Union.

Meo Vac district also has policies aimed at reducing child marriage, and Can Chu Phin commune is trying hard to implement them. Obtaining accurate numbers is challenging, given that 'Hmong ethnic tradition doesn't require marriage registration, and they don't dare to register marriage when they are not old enough. So they just marry each other. And they don't register marriage' (Women's Union KI). But the bulk of the evidence suggests that the practice is becoming far less common, especially amongst the youngest children.

The local approach to ending child marriage is also multi-pronged. In addition to intensive communication efforts, largely focused on health messages related to maternal and infant mortality (in part because child marriage is often related to consanguineous marriage in the Hmong community), but also including poverty reduction messages, the commune also fines boys' parents if they allow a child bride to stay in their home. Fines, which are a 'village regulation' according to KIs from both the People's Committee and the Women's Union, can be as high as 3 million dong and can also involve having parents 'punished by building a stone dam' or other local community infrastructure (Women's Union KI). While this

'I like boarding better than home. The school meals have meat, rice and fish. At home we only have steamed ground corn. In the evening we often play blind man's bluff, and 'ba te' game. I like that I can go out while I stay here; at home I have to work all the time; I like hanging out with my friends, playing singing and dancing together with my friends.'

(14-year-old girl)

integrated approach is working well, according to a KI at DOET, it is not a panacea. One village headman admitted that he would never enforce a marriage fine, because he wanted his people to respect him and feared that such draconian messages would undermine his social standing. Furthermore, the Women's Union KI noted that when children are married in more distant hamlets the girl is often pregnant by the time she is discovered – which means that the 'fine makes no sense'.

Although most respondents speak of child marriage as if it is fading but still 'normal', there is some evidence that local policies are beginning to shift norms. One father noted that it would be shameful to be fined. Another added, 'If we married off our daughter early, our close siblings would criticise us [and] wouldn't come to the celebration.' Besides, noted a third, 'it would be a bit of a waste…if I let her get married at age 15…I will only let her go after she helps us for a while until she's 18 years old.'

4.4 Conclusions

Plan's BIAAG community development approach has done much to make life better for Can Chu Phin's Hmong residents. It has also transformed the lives of the girls reached by its girls' clubs – building their confidence, encouraging them to focus on their education, and helping them to resist child marriage. Overall, however, BIAAG has not lived up to its girl-centred focus. With only two girls' clubs, one of which was in practice restricted to less vulnerable girls, no apparent girl-focused education for parents and little interface with the local power structure regarding the needs of adolescent girls, there is scope for improvement if Plan's BIAAG is to reach girls at scale.

Lessons from Because I Am A Girl: about child marriage programming

- **Girls' clubs are effective and should be expanded**. Given that younger girls have more flexible trajectories, clubs should be established in all lower-secondary schools, taking care to inclusively mix the most vulnerable with girls who already have some confidence and voice. Clubs and safe spaces should also be made available to older out-of-school girls, who tend be the most isolated, the most overworked and the most vulnerable to child marriage. Efforts should be made to make club activities both age appropriate and participatory. Games and contests are good for younger girls, but older girls require different activities.

- **Efforts should be made to teach parents about the specific vulnerabilities that girls face**, perhaps through the already existing Women's Union structure. When framed around rights, care should be taken to contextualise messages locally so that parents understand what they mean.
- **Programming should also proactively target boys.** Boys need programming directed at improving their understanding of their own role in perpetuating and ending child marriage. It would also be helpful if they were supported on how to talk to their parents about generational shifts, such as the need for higher education, but also about how to advocate for their sisters.
- **Direct enforcement of the law is effective.** Can Chu Phin's child protection board is able to cancel child marriages and appears to be seen by villagers as an 'authority'. However, given that village headmen want to be liked and justice officials are apparently not involved with the child protection board, there is considerable scope for harmonising Plan's efforts more with local needs and existing power structures.
- **Care needs to be taken to balance community infrastructure investments with communication and awareness-raising approaches**. Focusing on short-term, measurable impacts, such as building schools and water filtration systems may reduce longer-term impacts, including changing gendered social norms and the ability to support vulnerable adolescent girls.

Lessons from Can Chu Phin

- **Hmong students need better logistical support to make the transition to high school.** Two of the girls in our research had planned on attending high school, and had parents who ostensibly supported them to do so, but were unable to negotiate the paperwork required.
- **Supporting Hmong role models and increasing girls' access to such role models is critical.** One 15-year-old girl in the research quizzed her interviewer about her schooling and her life. When she ascertained that the interviewer was not Hmong, her face fell and she said, 'Hmong people just try to study but won't be able to become like you anyway.'
- **Bottom-up policies and programming can be highly effective at changing behaviour quickly.** Village-level fines aimed at truancy have made tremendous inroads into establishing new habits in a very short time frame, changing not just behaviour but beliefs about which behaviours are desirable. If this local ownership could be harnessed and directed at ending child marriage, evidence suggests a tipping point for abandonment could be achieved in only a few years.
- **Semi-boarding options at advanced primary and lower-secondary schools have tremendous potential** to alter girls' educational trajectories – and thus their broader life trajectories. They offer not only increased contact hours with teachers and academic material, but better food, better rest, and more socialisation.

5 Case study: *Oxfam's My Rights, My Voice: Promoting social accountability in the education sector in Vietnam*

Oxfam's *My Rights, My Voice* works to help marginalised children and adolescents in a variety of developing countries understand and claim their rights (Oxfam, 2013a). Launched in 2011 in three provinces – including Lao Cai (see Box 7), the Vietnamese project, *Promoting social accountability in the education sector in Vietnam*, is focused on improving ethnic minority children's access to quality education. It aims to do this by empowering children to understand and express their needs, helping improve school management by not only building local capacity to implement child-centred teaching but also fostering cooperation between schools, parents and other local stakeholders, and by driving national policy (Oxfam, 2013b).

Box 7: Programme site overview

Oxfam's *My Rights, My Voice* project is working in the Man Than commune – one of thirteen in the Si Ma Cai district of Lao Cai province. Located in the northern mountains on the border with China, Si Ma Cai is home to just over 33,000 people representing eleven ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Hmong, who make up nearly 85% of the population. While Lao Cai's poverty rate (32.9% in 2012) is significantly lower than Ha Giang's, Si Ma Cai is one of the poorest districts in the province. Man Than commune, however, is not poor. Its leadership is dynamic and well educated and its well-developed infrastructure made it more connected and allowed for income diversification – significantly reducing poverty. Because the commune's poverty rate dropped from 47.8% in 2012 to 34.3% in 2013, earning it the designation of 'most improved' in the district, Man Than is in the process of being recognised as a 'Model Commune'[15] under the New Rural Development Programme, a rare achievement for an ethnic minority community in the impoverished north.

We selected Oxfam's project for two reasons. First was simple availability. There are very few programmes aimed at Hmong children and this was one of only three programmes running with the target population – adolescent Hmong girls. Second, while this Oxfam project is directed at improving children's access to quality education, not at improving girls' access to education, reducing early marriage or head-on tackling the gender norms that limit Hmong girls' capabilities, we hypothesised that given its focus (strengthening children's voice, promoting the universal right to education and building strong, cooperative relationships to support children's schooling) there would be spill-over impacts on the gender-specific issues on which we are focusing.

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15 The 'Model Commune' programme is fundamentally a self-help programme that rewards communes' ability to translate their own meagre resources into measurable outputs. It encourages communes to use their own human resources – and their own financial resources – to essentially compete for the 'prize' of having accomplished the most with the least outside input (Vu et al., 2014). For a largely Hmong commune in the mountains to have achieved this designation is genuinely remarkable, even given national resources being directed at ethnic minorities

5.1 Project goals and modalities

The goal of *Promoting social accountability in the education sector in Vietnam* is to increase the number of children, especially girls and ethnic minority children, who have access to good quality basic education. In light of the extremely top-down nature of power in Viet Nam, which tends to exclude parents from educational dialogues and rely on traditional 'chalk and talk' methods of teaching, Oxfam's theory of change is based on the development of more equal power relations (Oxfam, 2013b). The goals of this project, which began in two schools in Si Ma Cai[16] in 2011 and completed activities in late 2014, are to help education's main stakeholders –children, parents and schools – to develop more equitable relationships and also to improve the working relationships between schools and other government actors.

Figure 12: Man Than's lower-secondary school

Oxfam brings to this project a long history of work in Viet Nam. For nearly three decades they have developed innovative local programming for the national government to bring to scale. In particular, Oxfam has been a key player in educational reform. For nearly two decades they have worked, in tandem with local partners, to develop child-centred methodologies to deliver the national curriculum in more hands-on, participatory ways. The Lao Cai Department of Education and Training has long been one of those local partners. For more than ten years, they have worked with Oxfam to transform classroom activities. The result of this partnership, which has been bolstered by the involvement of a variety of other NGOs working in the same area in other sectors, is an already strong base of local teachers willing to champion child rights to their peers and a group of committed parents able to mobilise other parents by modelling investment in education.

Building on this base, the current project envisioned five outcomes (Indochina Research and Consulting, 2012; Oxfam, 2014):

1. Children understand their rights and can communicate them.
2. Parents are better able to hold teachers and schools accountable for quality schooling.
3. The improved commitment and capacity of teachers and schools to being accountable to children.
4. Strengthened accountability mechanisms between rights-holders and duty-bearers and among duty-bearers.
5. Findings/recommendations are incorporated into policies, programmes and plans.

Recognising that the development of local capacity is key to both immediate success and broader uptake, Oxfam tailored its delivery approach to build on the presence and strengths of Vietnamese mass organisations: the Youth Union and the Women's Union. The Youth Union is already linked to every school in the country and is tasked with helping to organise and support activities for school children – albeit in ways that tend toward the formal rather than the participatory. Similarly, the Women's Union reaches into every village in every commune and is tasked with helping improve women's rights. While in many ways reinforcing gender roles in the home (Waibel and Gluck, 2013), the Women's Union is nonetheless well-positioned to help parents, and mothers in particular, to advocate for their children's rights.

My Rights, My Voice has used a variety of modalities in order to equalise power relations and inculcate child rights (Oxfam, 2014). Children's activities have been particularly diverse. For instance, the project has supported contests in which children draw, sing, dance and write about their lives and their rights. It has helped children design game shows based on child rights, armed them with cameras and helped them document their voices

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16 The project is also running in a small handful of other schools in the Sa Pa district of Lao Cai – as well as in two other more southern provinces that also have high ethnic minority populations

through photography and words, and hosted exhibits of children's work – attended by children, parents, teachers and government officials – both locally and in Hanoi. It has also developed an innovative system of classroom mailboxes (see Box 11) that has allowed all children and teachers in pilot schools to anonymously communicate with one another about classroom and teaching strengths and weaknesses without fear of repercussion.

Oxfam's project has also developed local parents' groups. While Parent–Teacher Associations are common in Viet Nam, the standard model limits parents to supporting the school's demands, typically with monetary contributions, rather than placing demands on the school. Oxfam's groups, on the other hand, have helped introduce parents to the concept of child rights – focusing on their right to a quality education. They have also supported parents and teachers to engage in dialogue regarding children's schooling, so that parents better understand what and how their children are learning and what their learning outcomes are.

The programme has also provided training to a wide variety of stakeholders, including local government officials, teachers and administrators and officers and volunteers with the Youth Union and the Women's Union. The training has been on child rights, child-centred teaching methodologies and participatory processes.

Internal evaluation

While operating under the budget constraints that might be expected, Oxfam has endeavoured to evaluate the *My Rights, My Voice* project in order to document its impacts and, moreover, to ascertain impact pathways. It undertook a baseline study to be able to document local understandings of children's rights and existing power relations between children, teachers, parents and local authorities (Indochina Research and Consulting, 2012), and has also completed a mid-term review (Oxfam, 2014). That review, while noting several key weaknesses, many of which were primarily the result of the short timeframe between inception and evaluation, found positive results overall for most programme components.

In terms of the first outcome, children's ability to identify and communicate about their rights, the mid-term review was laudatory (Oxfam, 2014). At the Lao Cai site, 80% of students felt that their understanding of child rights had improved. Furthermore, nearly 90% of teachers felt that children's understanding of their rights had improved. On the other hand, most of that 'understanding' remained at a fairly basic level – with children continuing to be 'fuzzy' on the application of rights and having difficulty communicating them to other people. This was especially true for children's understanding of their rights to gender equality and seems to have been largely the result of the fact that fewer children received any form of gender training. For example, while nearly 85% of children received direct training on child rights, and nearly 70% participated in the mailbox training, only 44% received training on gender equality and less than 19% were able to participate in a girls' club. Girls seem to have felt this lacuna keenly and expressed to reviewers that they had hoped 'to gain something in the clubs appropriate for their gender' (Oxfam, 2014: 13). Furthermore, while three-fifths of children reported that they felt more confident in their ability to identify their own needs and discuss them with their teachers, teachers' evaluations of children's confidence and communication skills were markedly lower. For example, only 43% of Lao Cai teachers felt that children had the skills to present their ideas to teachers.

Outside of the finding that the right to gender equality was not well integrated into trainings, the mid-term review identified two major project weaknesses with regard to the first outcome. Specifically, the review noted that programming had yet to reach most children in target schools because a handful of children (10-20%) were being chosen to participate in many activities – effectively monopolising programme seats. This is especially problematic because that handful of children appears to have been chosen not because they were the most vulnerable to right violations, but because they were the best students (p. 60). Furthermore, the review found that some children misunderstood how rights and duties are inexorably bound. For example, the review noted that 'in child rights forum or dialogs, students ask for better infrastructure support, while they do not realize their responsibility for maintaining and preserving the current infrastructure,' and it showed photos of trash-covered toilets and sinks (Oxfam, 2014: 14).

In terms of the second outcome (parents' ability to hold the school accountable for providing a quality education), the mid-term review found that while parents reported greater understanding of children's rights – and while a small handful of parents were more active in school activities – most parents' participation was constrained by language barriers and time poverty. This has meant that although parents are more likely to attend larger events, for the most part their work schedules preclude regular attendance at rights trainings. Similarly, lack of fluency in

Vietnamese has left the majority as passive rather than active participants because while translators were made available, written materials were provided in Kinh only. On the other hand, for the handful of parents with both the time and language to engage actively with Oxfam's project, the mid-term review found positive impacts on their planning and organisational skill-sets.

In terms of the third outcome - teachers' understanding of child rights – programme impacts were universally positive. In Lao Cai, nearly 90% of teachers reported a better understanding of the rights to gender equality and participation, nearly 95% reported creating equal chances for boys and girls and over three-quarters reported adjusting their teaching content and methods in order to improve gender responsiveness. On the other hand, despite positive reviews of Oxfam training, the mid-term review found little evidence that teachers, parents and students were able to offer significant inputs into school planning procedures – in part because teachers reported being overloaded with tasks and in part because 'being used to hierarchical structures with little autonomy, some partners find it difficult to hand over responsibility' (Oxfam, 2014b: 23).

In regard to outcome four (strengthening accountability mechanisms between rights-holders and duty-bearers and among duty-bearers) findings were mixed. On the one hand, the review found 'it is evident that the project activities have helped increase the local government's responsibility for education' (Oxfam, 2014: 39). On the other hand, especially in Si Ma Cai, coordination between project activities and stakeholders was weak. While DOET was well acquainted with Oxfam and its cooperative working style, the Women's Union and Youth Union were less so and it took time to familiarise them with Oxfam's approach and help them build cooperative working relationships between themselves. This was complicated by the reality that most of those involved had a great deal of responsibility for other tasks – and commensurately little time to spare.[17]

5.2 Primary research

Our research in many ways mirrors the findings of Oxfam's mid-term review. It finds that participating girls, and their families and teachers, report greater understanding of their rights, higher confidence, more engagement with academics and expanded aspirations. Our findings also suggest that the girls are more likely to communicate with their teachers and their parents on a wider array of subjects. There was also evidence that parents, teachers and other adult stakeholders are committed to supporting children and their rights – at significant costs to themselves in the case of parents, who must take on extra work in order to support their children's schooling. What is not clear from our research, however, is how many of these transformational changes can be attributed to the project rather than to the broader background of commune progress that is reflected in its nomination as a model commune – especially given that girls who were chosen to participate in the project, like those chosen to participate in Plan's school-based girls' club, appear to have been the 'cream of the crop' in terms of their personal future-seeking and familial support.

5.2.1 Changing children

Both adults and children report that *My Rights, My Voice* has had a wide array of impacts on girls' capabilities. All of the girls we interviewed were either in high school or planning to attend. All of those who mentioned their plans after high school mentioned tertiary education – with nearly all wanting to study either teaching or medicine. None of the girls wanted to marry during childhood and most wanted to wait until after the age of 20. All reported increased voice and agency within their families and their school environment, with mention made of knock-on impacts to gender-based violence and more equitable distribution of domestic labour.

'I liked the drawing contest the most. Because I drew what I liked and what I wanted – the whole family having a meal. I thought that the whole family hadn't been together for a long time, so I thought of one day when the whole family could eat and talk together happily.'

(12-year-old girl who lives at school and rarely sees her parents and five older siblings)

However, while Oxfam's project used rights-based programming and was specifically aimed at helping children understand and claim their rights, few of the changes seen in children appear to be attributable to the rights-based

aspect of the project. Instead, where changes in girls appear directly related to the project itself, they stem more from the hands-on, child-centred *methods* that built girls' confidence and voice than from any specific content.

5.2.1.1 Rights-based programming

Both adults and children reported that Oxfam's project has improved children's understanding of their rights. While that understanding, as noted in the mid-term review, can be a bit fuzzy – with one girl, for example, explaining that the right to protection means that when children see another child crying in the street they should help – overall most children seem to get the general gist of child rights. One 14-year-old girl, living at school during the week and delighted to have decent meals and time for recreation for the first time in her life, explained, 'Take the right of protection, parents and people have to protect the children. Parents are not entitled to force their children to stay at home to work for them instead of going to school. As for the right of participation, parents have to allow their children to participate in the school, commune's and district's activities.' Another girl, 12 years old and from a hamlet so remote that she had to move to boarding school[18] in the fourth grade, fleshed out this explanation even further. She said, children have 'the right to care. They are cared for by teachers. They are loved and cared for by parents. The right to share feelings. The right to be protected by teachers from working too much and being kidnapped. The right to education, enjoying children's rights, receiving books and notebooks from teachers, being taught by teachers and being allowed by teachers to speak opinions.'

Figure 13: A Hmong girl in Man Than

However, for the most part, the children we interviewed discussed their rights as if they were reciting a UNICEF script. They talked about their right to participation and their right to protection, but did so with little understanding of what those rights meant from their own Hmong experience. For example, while one of the girls noted that when her parents fought she would get help from a neighbour, none of the children mentioned understanding that a freedom from violence was a child right. Given the high levels of alcohol-fuelled gender-based violence that we identified in previous research (Jones et al., 2013), it would have helped extend children's understanding of what rights actually mean to frame them in the context of common rights violations.

Representing a more significant gap in terms of helping children apply the concept of rights to their own lives, the *My Rights, My Voice* project in Si Ma Cai, unlike those in several other countries, did not directly address child marriage as a rights violation. While this may have been because participant children were largely quite young (12-14 years old) – and appear to have been conspicuously unlikely to experience premature marriage given their commune's broader exceptionalities – this was a notable gap given that forced and child marriage remain common in the larger Hmong community. Indeed, although arranged marriages and marriage by kidnapping appear to have been abandoned in Si Ma Cai, with adults noting that the last cases of the latter occurred about ten years ago, all of the children we interviewed knew of married children from other communes. While respondents universally agreed that 18 or 19 years old is the most 'normal' age at which girls marry, with even older seen as acceptable for women who have completed university, they also agreed that some girls continue to marry as early as 15 – simply not registering their marriages until they reach the legal age of 18.

Painting child marriage as a rights violation in the Hmong community will require a different approach than in many other contexts. As noted in the previous section, childc marriage is primarily child-driven, almost exclusively by boys who feel structurally bound to provide their parents with the labour of a daughter-in-law. Messages aimed at elimination will thus require careful tailoring that captures both boys' motivations for initiating

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18 This was likely a semi-boarding school, but she did not specify

marriage and girls' motivations for capitulating. However, for rights-education programming to ignore gender-specific rights violations by failing to even observe – much less stress – the link between child marriage and child rights is an important missed opportunity. Participant girls could have become key advocates for their more vulnerable peers and participant boys could have helped their peers to understand the ways in which boys' decisions limit girls' futures.

The only right that children appear to have understood in a local context is the right to education. At the same time they recognised that this was comparatively novel in their cultural environment – which is understandable given

Figure 14: A classroom in Man Than

that this is essentially the first generation of Hmong children to have the opportunity to finish primary school, let alone attend high school – and they expressed a great deal of ownership over it. Given the cultural expectation of filial piety, which has meant that girls in particular leave school as soon as their parents tell them to leave school, regardless of what their personal aspirations and capabilities might be, it was quite bold of one 12-year-old girl to note that 'Children shouldn't obey parents to drop out of school'. A Women's Union KI, who worked closely with the Parents' Group, said that this is increasingly common. 'In the past,' she explained, 'if parents told children to stay at home, they would stay at home; if parents told children not to go to school, they wouldn't go to school; but now after participating in the activity, they can tell their parents that they want to go to school and parents should let children go to school.'

It should be noted, however, that in regard to the uptake of education, Oxfam's rights-based programing in Man Than is significantly impacted by the longer history of NGO involvement in the commune. While universal access to high school remains a distant dream given the real and opportunity costs of attending, local commitment to education is remarkable: in only a few short years completing ninth grade has become 'the new normal' for both boys and girls. The commune's school buildings are new, the lower secondary school now houses students overnight during the school week, providing them with warm bedding and hot, nutritious food, and relieving them of the daily agricultural work that prevented them from focusing on their studies. High school students, most of whom are girls, can study locally rather than having to move to the district capital.[19] Students from poor families are offered a variety of support, including cash and food stipends and loans that do not have to be repaid until after their educations are complete. While Oxfam's framing of education as a right that children can demand of their parents almost certainly remains important in most other Hmong communities, in Man Than the ethos of education is so pervasive that disentangling impacts on girls' claim to education is impossible.

'At home there's a lot of work, I can't study.'

(14-year-old girl)

'I like it so much, because my teachers cook food for me and I live a happy life and have close friends. I love it. The food here is better than at home, because my family is poor and difficult, so we can't have good food to eat.'

(14-year-old girl)

'Sometime I cry and confide my stories to many friends. They also confide their stories to me and give me lots of advice. I tell them everything.'

(14-year-old girl)

6.2.1.2 Child-centred methods
Our research finds little evidence that Oxfam's rights-based programming has significantly reduced Man Than's girls' vulnerability to child marriage or expanded their access to education: in part because of the commune's exceptionality and in part because of missed opportunities to tailor programming to the local environment.

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19 The commune is located between two high schools; both are within five kilometres. This is markedly different than Ta Lung commune, where the authors have worked the last two years . Children there have no local options for high school

However, we do find that the project's child-centred methods are thoroughly engaging children's interest in ways that are likely to have cascading ramifications for the development of their capabilities. 'When the school teachers teach us,' explained one boy in an FGD, 'we don't get to play games. Oxfam project had a lot of games. For example, the friendship game made us know that there must be cooperation in order to gain success'. Indeed, while children were able to easily identify what they had learned by participating in various activities, they talked animatedly about how much fun these were. In other words, they *could* talk about their rights, but they *wanted* to talk about drawing and singing and playing.

On the one hand, this play is just play – and resource-intensive play at that. On the other hand, all of our respondents, including girls' brothers, noted that Oxfam's playful activities, like those of Plan's BIAAG, had led girls to 'become more daring, more self-confident' (boys' FGD). This confidence was evident in every aspect of girls' lives and was shockingly different from our experience with girls in other villages. Some demanded that their brothers do more around the house so that they had more time for homework. Others explained that they were no longer easy targets for playground bullies. One 12-year-old girl, for example said, 'I am strong. If other children scold me, I will show them my self-confidence, and they won't dare to scold me'. Another girl, 13, who was occasionally asked to miss school to help her mother work, said that Oxfam participation had given her the confidence to chase her dream no whatever her circumstances. Unlike her peers, who all want to pursue teaching or medicine, she wants to be a beauty queen (see Box 8).

Box 8: I have a dream

'I got more confident, I'm no longer afraid of other children, I felt more self-confident when talking to teachers. I talked to parents, aunts, uncles and elder brothers and sisters. When participating in the activities, I dream of becoming a beauty queen. I asked the computer. I wrote and sent. I didn't know who answered me, but I got the information on what I should do. I asked what I should do to become a beauty queen. The answer was that you must be tall and able to walk confidently, bold enough to tell your own story, confident to talk with teachers, not to hide your own dream, you should tell other people about your dream. I really want it, so I am trying to make it come true. I try to observe how a beauty queen looks, how to become a beauty queen, how to walk.'

(13-year-old girl)

Impacts on girls' relationship with parents
Like the girls in Plan's girls' clubs, nearly all of the girls participating in Oxfam's activities noted that their increased confidence had improved their relationships with their parents in terms of how often they talked and what they talked about. One explained, for example, that she was more likely to engage with her parents over what their various days had been like. She said, 'When I go home, I ask my dad what my parents did that day. And if they argued or not. Whether mom is ill or dad is ill or not. I tell them about days when I get good marks, and when I get told off by the teacher as well. And also when the teacher praises me'. Another girl specifically mentioned being less afraid of her parents and recognising for the first time that she had a right to her own opinion. 'In the past,' she said, 'I was too afraid of parents and didn't dare to say. Now I am more self-confident and I dare to speak and no longer fear being scolded'. One girl, the first in three years of interviews, even related that she not only had begun to push herself into her parents' decision-making, but that they had heeded her (see Box 9). Parents also noted that girls were talking to them more since they began participating in Oxfam's project – sometimes about the rights that they had learned (see Box 10) and often in a forthright manner. Indeed, one father from an FGD noted, with no rancour, that his daughter was very vocal with her opinions. He said, 'she will talk back and tell her parents straight…when we have done something that she is not pleased with'.

Box 9: Contributing to decision-making

'My uncle had a son who was studying in Bac Ha and he needed money, their family was very poor but their son was a very good pupil. I told my parents that we should lend them a little money so that they had enough money to provide for him to study at the boarding school in Bac Ha. My parents said yes. I heard the talk between parents and it took me a long time to convince them; finally they lent the money to my uncle and didn't buy the bed. If my parents didn't love me, like in other families, they might have beaten me. But they love me so much and listened to my opinion.'

(14-year-old girl)

Box 10: Child rights education as delivered by an adolescent girl to her father

'My daughter came into the house and told her dad, "I'm coming home to teach you". Oh dad is old, dad doesn't know anything. She taught her dad everything she learnt, teaching her dad not to drink too much, not to get drunk, not to do anything wrong, but to do right things. "Dad, you should do that, don't do wrong things. The teachers tell me to study; when not studying, I should go home to help my dad cook, clean dishes and sweep the floor. While in school, I learn whatever I'm told to learn. If I don't study, I go home to help my parents; if I can't work in the fields, I'll sweep the floor, tidy up the house, look after the house, and teach dad not to make the house dirty, or put things disorderly"'.

(Father in FGD)

Impacts on girls' relationships with teachers

Girls' communication with their teachers has also seen significant improvement as they have become more confident. Notably, girls directly attribute change on this front to specific Oxfam activities. One explained, 'In the past, whenever a teacher asked me, I was shy, but after participating in the 'Little reporters' club, when the teachers ask, I've become confident to talk to them and answer their questions'. Another added that the classroom mailbox has been very helpful for her (see Box 11). She said, 'It is good because if I don't dare to speak directly with teachers, I can write my comments and put into it, it is less frightening'. A Youth Union KI noted that the strength of Oxfam's approach in terms of helping children speak up is that it meets children where they are, as children 'are only confident to speak about something close to their lives'. By starting small and expanding outwards, explained a KI at DOET, Oxfam has helped 'children, especially girls' become more confident in their communication with their teachers and other adults. 'Now they can even speak out. For example when they see their school gate is dirty or someone's parents don't let them go to school, they dare to say these things already'.

Box 11: Mailboxes

While the mailbox approach is common in Viet Nam, the way in which Oxfam has implemented it in project areas has significantly improved its utility to both children and teachers. Traditionally schools have had one mailbox, which has often been kept in the teachers' room, significantly reducing children's access and essentially eliminating anonymity. Oxfam's approach, which put one box in every classroom, not only opened access to the mailbox, it reduced children's fear about using it. The end result is that children are communicating more with teachers about lessons they did not understand, teachers are learning how to adjust their teaching for non-native speakers, and both trust and learning are improving. Several girls, for example, explained that they use the boxes to elicit help in solving peer issues, and the DOET KI noted that teachers use the box as a non-confrontational way to encourage children to pay better attention. In fact, the new mailboxes have worked so well that they have spread far beyond the project's boundaries. Nearly every classroom in the province now has one.

Figure 15: An Oxfam classroom mailbox

Impacts on girls' social opportunities

Participation in Oxfam's hands-on activities has also helped girls expand their social opportunities, which is likely to play a key role in supporting them in their future-seeking. As noted in our previous research, Hmong girls tend to have very little time off for recreation because they are expected to simultaneously excel at school and carry a full load of domestic chores. This isolation makes it difficult for them to imagine new futures or to negotiate obstacles they encounter along the way. Our current research found that girls not only feel that Oxfam's project has bought them more time off to be with friends, but that it has helped them meet new people – critical in many cases to finding inspirational role models. One 12-year-old girl said, 'I've got more friends; I've been going out with them more often. In the evening [we] often go to the second floor to play hide and seek; on Wednesdays and Fridays if the teachers don't assign us [manual] work for the school, I can go with my friends to the hills to play.' Another girl, 13, added that she enjoyed working with the older girls on various activities. 'I like the group discussion with senior pupils on children's rights,' she explained. She continued, 'I like taking photographs with them. I like the teamwork game with the other older girls'.

Impacts on girls' education

Improvements in girls' confidence, communication skills and support networks are likely to have powerful impacts on their educational trajectories. While the uniqueness of the Si Ma Cai site leaves much still to be proved in terms of how critical child-centred methods are to girls' empowerment, our previous research has demonstrated that most Hmong girls are unable to even bring themselves to ask their parents to let them go to high school, because they are so tightly bound by notions of filial piety. Activities that help girls learn to identify their own unique needs and desires, which may be in the short-term quite different from what their parents want from and for them, helps nurture future-seeking. Activities that give girls opportunities to speak in front of their peers and adults, and encourages them to communicate their aspirations to their parents, trains them to speak up for themselves – which may also help them ask their brothers to more equitably divide household work so that they have time to study. Time with friends not only provides them with emotional support and exposure to role models but also gives them the opportunity to form cohort-specific norms that, in the case of Hmong communities, may represent a significant break with the past. Activities that help them communicate with teachers not only foster academic success and aspirations, but also encourage the personal relationships that allow them to see even non-Hmong teachers as role models.

Impacts on the timing of marriage

Improvements in girls' confidence and communication are also likely to reduce their vulnerability to child marriage. While again noting that the outlier nature of Man Than's girls and parents renders it challenging to draw empirical lessons, previous research has found that the primary driver of child marriage, from girls' perspective, is their inability to imagine any future other than wife and mother (Jones et al., 2013, 2014). To the extent that programming helps girls feel that they have other options, they are less likely to acquiesce to boys' too-soon marriage proposals. Indeed, a mother in a FGD noted that in Man Than child marriage and girls' aspirations are inversely related. She explained, 'Now all girls want to study to have better lives, so they don't

Figure 16: Girls have lunch at boarding school, photo taken by Hmong girl in Man Than

agree to get married early.' Improvements in girls' confidence and voice seem especially likely to help protect those kidnapped against their will – few of whom, previous years' research found, previously understood that they could say 'no'.

5.2.2 Changing community
The broader context of Man Than, as noted above, is quite favourable with regard to protecting children's rights and expanding their capabilities. The commitment shown to children by both parents and local officials is evident in myriad ways, ranging from mothers who recognise their children's need to play, to DOET officers who, when presented with a method that works, immediately take it to scale across the district.

Adults in Man Than, especially KIs, were enthusiastic about the ways in which Oxfam's project had strengthened the community. They particularly appreciated the way in which it encouraged local ownership, developed local capacity and altered the balance of power in terms of community conversation. Indeed, several KIs felt that the emphasis on participation and dialogue was genuinely transformatory.

5.2.2.1 Extending rights and shifting norms
While the fathers in our research knew that their children were having fun doing Oxfam activities but had little information about its content, mothers in Man Than, unlike those in Can Chu Phin, reported that they had learned more about their children's rights through Oxfam trainings – especially their right to education and their 'right' to clean water. Parents' comments suggest that, like the training provided to children, tailoring content to the local context is necessary if parents are to understand how child rights mesh with Hmong reality. One mother, for example, explained that after she had heard how it important it was for children to go to school on a regular basis, she had begun getting up early, in time to cook breakfast for her children, so that they were not late to school. This is notable given that our previous research has indicated that it is most often children who get up early to cook for their parents. Similarly, a comment by a father in an FGD – 'When we do things that are not right, our child can disagree; we won't oppose her, we will only laugh because we're parents' – may point to a way of explaining how children's right to participation may play out in a family context.

KIs observed that while *My Rights, My Voice* has contributed to shifting norms and expectations regarding children's rights, deepening and extending community conversations, the commune already had strong initiatives supporting education in particular. Indeed, although the vast majority of parents had not had the opportunity to attend school as children, the men in our FGD had participated in literacy education programming and broadly understood that children benefited from as much education as their parents could afford to give them. 'In the past,' noted one father, 'because our parents were not knowledgeable, they weren't supportive of their children's studies. Nowadays it's different; it's better to let our children go to school, so that they will have a future.' Even more telling is the growing community shame heaped on those who do not support their children's education. Another father said, 'The more supportive we are of their studies, the better the neighbours will judge us. If we are not supportive of our children's studies, we're afraid that they will laugh at us for not being supportive of our children.' A KI on the People's Committee observed that educational norms had shifted far further and faster than the comparatively favourable economic situation. Even university graduates were no longer assured of local jobs. 'They hope and really want to work at the commune office, but we can't stuff them in,' he explained – adding that he was worried that if jobs were not forthcoming then commitment to education might drop.

While our prior research identified a strong preference for prioritising sons for scarce educational opportunities, because sons and not daughters support their parents in old age and venerate them after death, in Man Than this does not appear to be common. While KIs assert that this is because dropping birth-rates have meant that parents can afford to educate both sons and daughters, the large families of most of our respondents suggest that improving economics are probably less important than shifting norms. A mother in the FGD explained, 'A grade 12 girl may work at home, but she is better at communicating and reading information and she is able to care for her life.'

KIs also noted that while Oxfam introduced parents to some general notions about gender equality, explaining 'discrimination or non-discrimination against boys and girls', the most significant efforts to combat the violation of girls' rights vis-à-vis child marriage are home-grown. The Women's Union, for example, includes child marriage as one of the 'NOs' that they teach in monthly meetings and, based on our interviews, messages regarding child marriage and poverty and child marriage and poor infant health are universally understood. Local efforts to couple the conceptual dangers of child marriage with concrete disincentives are clearly also powerful. The

commune fines couples 400,000 dong for child marriage and takes away families' access to other benefits if their children marry too young. A KI noted that poor families lose access to loans, for example, and that officials actually lose their jobs if they allow their children to marry. Most notable, from a norms perspective, is the shame that can be directed towards the parents of young couples. 'In the village, people will look [at you]; even if you're just a common person, they will judge that you're not a good person, who doesn't conform,' explained one father. Parents in our research are clearly working hard to make sure that their children do not marry early. For example, one girl reported that her father had told her that marriage at the age of 18 was fine as long as you did not have any dreams. Another girl explained that her mother had told her that early marriage and happiness were incompatible.

Local officials are acutely aware of the fact that in some situations, rights can be contradictory. For example, because child marriage is a private matter easily hidden from public eyes – and one that cannot be 'undone' once consummated – protecting the best interests of married children can require complicated decision-making. On the one hand, the marriage of girls under the age of 18 and boys under the age of 20 violates national law. On the other hand, fining already poor families only further increases child vulnerability. Similarly, denying birth certificates to the babies born to under-aged mothers ultimately jeopardises the rights of another generation. Health officials have chosen to deal with this conundrum by turning a blind eye. They admitted to our research team that they have an 'unofficial policy' of simply 'forgetting' to write down the age of the mother when she is clearly too young to be legally married.

5.2.2.2 Fostering dialogue

In much the same way that child-centred methods fostered the most growth in girls, the Oxfam supported 'trilateral' dialogue between parents, schools and officials promoted the most significant changes in the broader community context, especially with regard to children's education. One adult in the Community Mapping, for example, noted that recent investment in educational infrastructure and changes in classroom methodologies were 'partly thanks to the commune authorities' attention, and collaboration between the schools, parents and commune authorities'. Another added that participatory problem-solving had been especially key; 'they taught us to write existing problems, effects, and causes of problems, to which we would figure out solutions.'

The KI from the People's Committee confirmed that this approach had been brought to the commune by Oxfam. Before the project, he explained, 'the commune authority and state communicate this knowledge to people'. 'But the special thing about the Oxfam's program,' he continued, 'is that parents directly participated in training'. The KI from DOET added, 'Previously the dialogue was confrontational. Oxfam's trilateral dialogue was different.' For example, if a child in the commune was considered at risk for dropping out of school or getting married then a consultation would be held between parents, the school and commune authorities. The group would identify what each would need to do in order to solve the problem and 'everyone would raise their hands to vote. Everyone would pledge to implement.'

In terms of parents' support for Oxfam activities, KIs note that it was largely a core group of dedicated mothers who were the most active. They mobilised other parents to attend meetings, ensured children's attendance and helped the school resolve its lack of access to water. While most parents were more tangentially involved in Oxfam activities – this does not mean that they did not feel included in emerging dialogues. Indeed, a common theme amongst parents was that they felt more like partners in their children's education. One mother, for example, explained, 'What I like best is that I hear about the progress which my child made in school.' Another added that she and her husband actively communicate about the meetings. 'My husband asks me immediately after I come home from the meetings: "What was the meeting about?" He tells me if he participates and I tell him if I participate'.

Commune officials are also clearly going out of their way to engage with children about the importance of education. Nearly all of the girls we interviewed mentioned that they had been approached by officials, typically in informal settings, and made to feel as if they and their school trajectories were important.

5.3 Local critiques

Both children and adults were satisfied with *My Rights, My Voice*. Indeed, children's only significant complaint echoed a finding of the mid-term review: they wanted more friends to have the opportunity to participate. Parents

too had only one complaint, which related to language. Several mothers, for example, noted that even when translators were provided it was often difficult to keep up with what was being said in the rights-training. 'I like going there to listen and know,' said one, 'but many times I listened to it via a translator and didn't understand all the content.' Another mother apologetically noted, when she was unable to recall many specifics about the training, 'We were told to take note but I am illiterate.' This is a significant gap given that Oxfam 'puts women at the centre' of all that it does – and is cognisant of Hmong women's literacy and language issues. Indeed, while project documents related to the Vietnamese rendition of *My Rights, My Voice* repeatedly insert the phrases 'especially girls and ethnic minority children' and 'especially ethnic minority parents and women' in parentheses after every use of the words 'children' and 'parents', the nexus of gender and ethnicity appears to have been poorly thought out in terms of application.

KIs with a broader understanding of both commune needs and programme possibilities had more suggestions for improvement. First, they felt that the geographical scope of the parents' group needed to be significantly enlarged. Language and literacy issues aside, the stronger relationships fostered by the trilateral dialogue meant that KIs wished the method could be rapidly taken to scale across hamlets instead of available in only one. Second, KIs reiterated that teachers and officials, especially those from the Women's Unions, are already overburdened with work – a condition they share with many parents.

Finally, KIs noted that girls were only 'a little bit' prioritised over boys. Given the number of times that they emphasised that girls were 'quieter' than boys, 'shyer' than boys, and 'less confident' than boys, it was clear that they saw this as a programming gap. This is certainly supported by our prior research, which found that while Hmong boys tend to be left to explore their interests and their local environment independently, picking up language skills and confidence along the way, Hmong girls are often kept too busy and too exhausted to contemplate their futures.

5.4 Conclusions

Oxfam's long history in Viet Nam and Lao Cai has helped it build a solid base on which to test new programming. Its experience with participatory methodologies in general and child-centred methodologies in particular have helped it accomplish much with little in just a few years. Girls in Man Than are brimming with confidence and dreams for the future and parents and officials are beginning to transform their

Oxfam 'offers a chance for us to hear children's wishes, as they really want their voices heard and we should know what the children think and what they wish'.

(Youth Union KI)

relationships with one another in order to better support the commune's children. That said, it is difficult, given that longer history, coupled with Man Than's broader exceptionality and the deliberate selection of just a handful of the commune's best and brightest students to participate in activities, to quantify impacts in ways that speak to scalability.

Lessons learned from *My Rights, My Voice*:

Efforts should be made to ensure that rights-based programming is locally contextualised and pays attention to ethnic-specific rights violations that derive from ethnic-specific norms**.** While child rights are universal, the threats to child rights are gender- and context-specific. Opportunities to address this should never be overlooked and should be very carefully tailored for ethnic differences.

- **Efforts should be made to aim programming at the nexus of gender and ethnicity**. It is not enough to serve either women or ethnic communities: ethnic minority girls and women need tailored programming.
- **Ensure that programme participants include the most vulnerable.** While it can be appropriate for a programme's initial 'class' of children to be the most capable, so that they can serve as role models, care needs to be taken to transition as quickly as possible to target the particularly vulnerable.
- **Working with local partners is critical but requires adequate resourcing.** Using local organisations such as the Youth Union and the Women's Union to deliver content builds local ownership and capacity and improves replicability. However, given the already high workloads of

those cadres, adding to their responsibilities risks overloading the most supportive and effective of them.

- **Hands-on, participatory activities that win children's hearts through play have critical spill-over effects.** Such activities build competence that flows throughout their lives and has the potential to cascade across lifespans. What children appreciate about programming is that it is fun and what they remember may be the play-based elements (and snacks) rather than content. This suggests that in a world of limited budgets, it is advisable to engage in more games for more children and fewer trips to Hanoi.

Larger lessons learned from Man Than:

- **Harnessing lessons from Man Than's success is a critical next step.** While Man Than's girls glow with confidence both in themselves and in continued parental support, and are hardly representative of the larger cohort of Hmong adolescents, their parents are nearly illiterate farmers. This leads to two key observations. First, there is an existing base of Hmong **role models**, albeit in geographically specific locations. Programmes such as Plan's BIAAG should use this resource strategically to show more isolated, traditional Hmong girls what Hmong girlhood *can* look like. Second, it is important to aim **future research** at ascertaining why these illiterate, subsistence farmers are resisting tradition to so enthusiastically support their daughters' educations.
- **Semi-boarding options at schools have tremendous potential to alter girls' educational trajectories, and thus their life trajectories.** As noted in the previous section, they offer not only increased contact hours with teachers and academic material, but better food, better rest, and more socialisation.
- **More attention is needed on men's and boys' roles in supporting the development of girls' capabilities more generally.** This is true both in terms of the emotional support that fathers and brothers can offer – but also in terms of the financial support that they are uniquely positioned to provide. More specifically, greater attention needs to be directed at ways to leverage the role of Hmong fathers as head of the household in order to prevent child marriage. As one father in the FGD noted, 'To end child marriage there must be involvement of all the men, to somehow speak to make the women, girls and boys understand their meaning, so that they will become mature first so that when they get married, they will be able to develop their economic conditions. When they're too young, they can't think yet.' Even as it reinforces the gender hierarchies that give men's voices more weight than those of women, this man's observation is important for a number of reasons. First, in the Hmong community it *is* men who ultimately make decisions. In the short term, recognising men's positions and using them to spread messages gets those messages further and faster than targeting women and children. Second, there is solid science behind the FGD participant's assertion that adolescents 'can't think'. As legal change means that child marriage becomes less about parents' stated need for labour and more about tempestuous hormones, getting programming to cover both bases may be a smart move.

6 Case Study: Meo Vac High School's Extra-curricular classes

Unable to locate a third project specifically working with Hmong girls to improve their uptake of education and decrease their odds of child marriage, we chose a third case study that we hypothesised could have spill-over effects on child marriage risks: the efforts of Meo Vac district's high school. The high school has had a variety of programming aimed at child marriage, primarily focused on teaching children about the Marriage and Family Law and the health consequences of child and consanguineous marriage, although current programming is more ad hoc than systematic. One of these programmes, *You and Me*, ran in 2012-2013 but was phased out when the high school and lower-secondary school split at the beginning of the 2013 school year.[20] A few children have vague memories of attending sessions once or twice when they were younger. Another, *When I am 18* (under the purview of the Youth Union), has not been offered for the last two years because enrolment has increased so rapidly that teachers and classrooms are perpetually busy. What is left now in terms of child marriage and SRH programming is a rotating array of ad-hoc subjects that are offered by individual teachers to their individual classes once or twice a month. While love and marriage are discussed, most students appear to receive little information beyond the standard health and population messages that are already embedded in the Citizenship curriculum.

6.1 Meo Vac High School

Driven by the growth in lower-secondary enrolments, the number of children enrolled in Meo Vac's Upper-Secondary School, which is located in Meo Vac town, is growing explosively. A Youth Union official explained that three years ago, 'When I came here to work, there were nine classes; last year there were 14 classes and this year there are 19 classes. It increases very fast'. This rapid growth is not exclusively due to increases in Hmong enrolment. Of the 681 students enrolled in the high school this year, only about 200 are Hmong.[21] Hmong school girls remain even rarer because, as noted by one boy in an FGD, 'Usually boys are favoured, sent to school; as for girls, the old tradition is still followed; men are valued above

Figure 17: Meo Vac Upper-Secondary School

women'. Besides, added another, even when girls do enrol, they often drop out after just a few months: 'Because there's nobody to work at home, they drop out to go home and help their parents.'

Interviewing high school students provided a new window into understanding the diversity of educational trajectories now open to Hmong students in Meo Vac. It clearly highlighted the differences opening up between

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20 You and Me also ran in 2010
21 Of the nearly 700 students, about 600 are ethnic minority – including Tay and Giay. A count of Hmong girls was "not available" and likely indicates that there were very few

villages as some (the more central) experience rapid improvement in education and others (the more remote) do not. The students we interviewed are from different villages in different communes all over the district. In some of those villages it is now common for all students, girls and boys, to complete 12th grade. In other villages, ninth grade is typical. Some still rarely see children progress past primary school.

The Hmong girls we interviewed were impressive. While a few had well educated parents and were relatively well off, most were quite poor and had to work in the market at the weekends to earn cash to cover incidentals, such as shampoo – because their parents simply could not contribute any more. Most notably, several of the Hmong girls who participated in our research were attending high school through their own rather exceptional efforts. While their parents were now supportive of their chosen paths, several had defied their parents' demands to stay home and found alternate routes to high school.

The commitment of these girls to bettering themselves through education was fierce. Having fought battles to enrol, they were determined to make every day count and ultimately emerge from university as teachers, doctors and prosecutors. One girl, 16 years old and in the 'gifted' class (which includes 27 girls and 8 boys) explained: 'You should have high average scores and good conduct. The boys seems to be more playful.' A Youth Union official explained that this is increasingly common. She noted that Youth Union membership and leadership is now tilted towards girls because their 'participation is more active'.

'If you can go to the outside world, you can see many new things which you can only see in the outside world. If you spend all your time at home, you only follow the buffalo's and cow's asses and you can't do anything.'

(18-year-old girl)

Although 'some teachers are cold so we don't dare express our opinions' (FGD girls), most teachers at the Meo Vac high school appear to be good teachers who are genuinely interested in children's academic and broader well-being. The adolescents in our research said that teachers take especially good care of rural children, giving them 'much priority' (15-year-old girl). An 18-year-old boy explained that this was because, 'Most of the students from the villages are better behaved'. A Youth Union official confirmed that this was the case: while many rural students arrive with academic deficits, they study harder than the local students, who are 'indulged by the parents and are more keen on playing'.

As previously observed, students from the more rural hamlets have reason to focus. All understand the difficult lives that their parents lead and are desperate to avoid the same experience. Indeed, for some, boarding at the high school is the first time they have had regular, nutritious meals and a respite from work. A 15-year-old girl explained, 'I wish to be in the school forever and never to go back home to work in the field. Working in the field is very hard.' Her classmate, a boy of 15, added, 'I only feel joy and happiness. While I'm here, there are both food and drinks.' Another tenth grade girl concluded, 'I am very keen on studying. Since moving here, I feel easy and relaxed. At home I worked all the time.'

While one girl noted that her older brother had returned to and completed high school after leaving school after ninth grade in order to marry, the teachers indicated that none of the students currently enrolled are married.

6.2 Child marriage programming

The *You and Me* club ran between 2012 and 2013. The Youth Union KI noted that over 200 children were in the club and that it met every week, primarily as a way of providing children with socialisation opportunities. It 'held games, modelled after the TV game show Ringing the Golden Bell, a quiz on reproductive health… Sometimes a class played a drama on drug usage, prostitution, HIV/AIDS on the stage. We also invited population officers from the district capital to communicate on teenager's reproductive health for the students'. While students' memories of this club are fuzzy, as it has been several years since the school was forced to disband it due to the growing population of students, one 17-year-old girl remembers her experience quite vividly. She reminisced, 'I was in grade eight; my sister took me there. It was held every Thursday by the school. In the meetings they talked about friendship, reproductive health and schooling age love. I only remember that it was about reproductive health and puberty. It was instructed by a teacher who used to teach here many years ago. There were about 39 or 40 participants, both boys and girls. I found it exciting because boys and girls talked with each other naturally. It was more funny and more comfortable, unlike the class atmosphere.'

The programme *When I am 18*, run by the Youth Union, appears to have provided roughly similar information, but for older children only; our respondents noted that only 11th and 12th graders were allowed to join. The club, which met once a month for two hours, had to disband two years ago because, as one 16-year-old girl explained, 'Now we study two shifts a day, teachers are very busy'.

The child marriage and SRH information provided to current students is bundled in monthly extra-curricular classes that are offered by individual teachers to their individual classes—meaning that girls and boys are taught together by teachers who can be either female or male. Teachers explained that topics rotate, with October, for example, focusing on Love and Gender. While communication about the law is an important part of the content, students in some classes also learn about 'love and friendship' (boys' FGD) and 'reproductive health' (girls' FGD), albeit in a tightly focused manner. Students mentioned, for example, that they had been taught that they must remain focused on their studies and not be distracted by sexual relationships until they are out of school and have stable employment: 'The teacher asks some sensitive questions such as about love, then he says that at the age you should make friends only – you shouldn't go beyond that. That's what the informal talk is about,' explained a 16-year-old girl.

'Teachers already serve as counsellors who have intimate talks with them, but it would be better if trained psychology specialists were available to help them...because children at the age are changing biologically.'

(Teacher)

Some teachers clearly try hard to make these lessons salient to students by encouraging participation through sport and art and open discussion, which is challenging given that they are responsible for writing their own lessons[22] and are largely confined to delivering messages about naturally developing sexuality within the framework of 'social evils' and population control. One reported that 'girls participate very actively because this subject is very attractive to them as the theme has practical implications to their lives'. Most, however, recognised that they were out of their depth in teaching this type of content. Several commented on the need for specialists to deliver such emotionally laden material, since children feel 'ashamed…when teachers mentioned the sex issue' (Youth Union KI). Another added: 'We really want the children from the commune to participate more actively, [but] only few of them take part and their participation is limited to watching because some of them are too reserved to play a role or to join the club'. A 16-year-old girl agreed that the teachers were correct. She said of her classmates, 'They don't dare to ask about reproductive health, they are shy.'

Over the summer students received an extra lecture on reproductive health from population officials. They came, explained a 16-year-old girl, to 'give advice on reproductive and sexual health. Girls could come to listen about safe sex, ovulation, and menstruation'. This type of very specific information appears to be lacking for most children, who are hungry for a 'deeper and more detailed' (18-year-old girl)

'My mother and older sister have intimate talks with me. I am in my rebellious period, half child and half adult, it is difficult to teach, so people often have intimate talks with me.'

(16-year-old girl)

understanding of their bodies, preferably taught with 'pictures as examples…and videos to help us understand the situation better' (boy in FGD). Unfortunately, concluded the only girl who appears to have attended this extra lecture (since she lives in Meo Vac town and had fewer demands on her time and no transportation issues), 'I heard it via loudspeakers. I don't remember well because I sat far from the podium and the microphone didn't work well.'

Even this minimal content is making a difference to some children. One boy, for example, reported that while he had previously planned on marrying right out of high school, after the extracurricular sessions, 'I decided that I must have a career and be able to raise my family' first. A girl added that going 'to clubs and plays' had helped her and her classmate 'become more knowledgeable so we are more self-confident'.

The key extra-curricular message that seems to have hit home with children is how to set boundaries around love and friendship. These adolescents, who a generation ago would have already been married, now find themselves in a residential situation in which they are expected to remain focused on their educations. For many, this appears to feel very overwhelming – as they are constantly juggling 'strange feelings when standing next to a friend of the opposite sex' (17-year-old girl). A boy in an FGD added, 'Sometimes love and friendship could be mistaken a

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22 There is no national curriculum for these classes. While teachers have access to a handful of supporting materials, lesson plans are written by individual teachers for their individual classes

little bit, and these extracurricular activities will help us understand better'. Children appear to be learning practical strategies for dealing with their conflicting emotions in their informal sessions. One girl in an FGD explained, 'I will text him back saying we are only friends; I don't want to fall in love early'. Another added, 'I will tell him that…being in love at this period is only for fun, but when saying goodbye they will cry and won't be in a mood for studying. So I think that when we are in school, being in love is not needed.'

The school also issues contracts for children to sign promising that they will not marry over Tet (New Year), the most common time for initiating marriage. Beginning three years ago, explained a 16-year-old girl, 'there were letters of commitment to not get married early …the student signed it and returned it to the teachers.' Students were asked to get their parents to sign the letters too but, as most students noted, their parents are illiterate. Teachers in the FGD noted that the students, on the other hand, 'signed it enthusiastically'.

6.3 Girl Power

A theme that has emerged from this research (especially the Plan site) as well as from previous research is the need for Hmong girls to be Hmong role models (Jones et al., 2013, 2014). While some girls model themselves on their teachers, even if they are not Hmong, it is apparent that most Hmong girls tend to write off a great many possible future paths simply because they are not open to Hmong people – much less Hmong girls – because the Hmong are 'backwards', 'ignorant' farmers, and Hmong girls are 'other people's women'. The Hmong girls at Meo Vac high school could be the models their peers need. Most have overcome overwhelming odds to make it to high school. Several have defied their parents to stake out their own futures (see Boxes 12 and 13). A few have already worked to help their peers negotiate education with their own parents (see Box 14). All want to give back to the Hmong community (see Box 15).

'Among my classmates from the communes, the majority of them want to become teachers, so that they can bring knowledge there and persuade children there not to get married early. And then they will persuade parents to eradicate the outdated custom of child marriage.'

(17-year-old girl)

Box 12: The importance of role models

Chu Thi Vang is 18 years old and in the 11th grade. She is a year behind her classmates in terms of age because she sat out a year after ninth grade – before being inspired by a commune official with stories of successful Hmong girls and the larger world. While her parents initially refused to allow her to go to school, she insisted, and won.

Because 'I am the youngest child', Vang explained, 'my parents always said that they would let me continue my education.' When it came time for her to apply to high school, however, they refused and told her that she must stay home and work in the fields with them. After 'one year at home', she added, working and talking with 'my cousin and a friend living in the same hamlet', they all decided to go back to school. 'One day, we went to the commune office and asked the man if the school still had quota to enrol students or not.'

He told us, she continued, many things. 'He told me about two girls in hamlets. After finishing the school, one is an officer and one is a teacher. He told me to try to study and find a job.' He told 'us that girls don't have to get married early'. Most amazingly, from Vang's perspective, he told them that when they had graduated, and found jobs of their own, they would have money and could travel.

'I insisted on enrolling', Vang explained. 'I said that I would go to the school definitely, I didn't want to stay at home, I wanted to study.'

Now her parents are resigned to – and even proud of – her choice: they 'indulge me and don't force me to get married'. She admits to treading carefully though: 'At home, I am very nice, do all the housework so my parents don't have anything to complain about'. Vang also works in the market at the weekends to make money so that she has to ask for little. 'I don't want to ask parents for money, because they are poor. I live in the dormitory and I don't spend much money.'

Ultimately, she concluded, 'I want to see all of my country.'

Box 13: The importance of brotherly support

Si Thi Mi is 15 years old and has already defied her parents twice to make sure that she had the chance to attend high school. With the help of the commune, who threatened to cut off all support for her parents if they did not allow her to study, and the support of her older brother, who told her parents that they needed to recognise her determination, she has made it to tenth grade. While she acknowledges that she is unlikely to achieve her dream of being a singer, she says that becoming an English teacher is good enough.

Mi explained, 'In the past, when I finished grade nine, my parents told me not to enter the upper secondary school here. I insisted on it and prepared the documentation to enrol in the school.' The commune authority accepted her application and the school sent her an invitation. Her parents again refused to allow her to leave. At this point the commune stepped in and 'told my parents that if they didn't allow me to go, the authority would cut off all support or any gifts destined to my family.' She was allowed to go to school.

The transition to high school was, however, harder than she thought it would be. 'After having been here for one week, I missed my family and went home.' While Mi told her parents that she had made up her mind, and would be returning to school, they told her that 'if I didn't achieve well or get recognised as a fairly good pupil, I would have to go back to work on the field.'

Armed with experience, Mi knows that 'If I have any problem, I will ask the school and commune for help.' She also now has the support of her eldest brother, who told her parents 'not to stop me because if I am determined to study: it means that I have many dreams.' Thankfully, she concluded, 'my parents listened to my eldest brother and let me go to school.'

'I have,' she explained, 'an ambitious dream but I don't know if I can make it come true. I wish that I will become a famous singer, but I can't learn singing here'. Instead, Mi added, 'I want to become a teacher, an English teacher.'

Box 14: Championing girls' right to an education

Thi Giang is a 17-year-old girl with well-educated parents – both of whom are officials. She is a passionate believer in abandoning outdated customs that harm girls and believes that, 'in general, no one wants to get married early: they prefer studying'. Giang is determined that girls can help each other convince their parents to allow them 'to enter universities or at least vocational colleges or intermediate vocational schools, then find jobs.' Failing that, she said, girls can report their parents to the authorities.

Giang explained, 'We helped one girl by visiting her house and talking with her parents.' Eventually, she said, 'Her parents understood and they invited us to have meal.' But even if parents are not convinced, she continued, there is a solution. 'If parents don't abandon the idea of forcing their children to drop out, we will report them to our teachers and the commune authority, who will have their own solution.'

Box 15: Individual determination pays off

Thi Thao is a 17-year-old boarding student from a traditional Hmong family. Her father completed third grade. Her mother is illiterate. Her brother left school after ninth grade and married at the age of 15. Thao, however, wanted more.

From a remote hamlet with only a satellite early-primary school, Thao was forced to board beginning in fourth grade as the footpath to school was too dangerous for a small child to negotiate on her own. In ninth grade, when her parents judged her old enough, she returned home to live and commuted to school each day. I 'got up at 3 am to go to school' every morning, she explained. 'At noon, when class finished, I went back home to help my parents cut grass for the buffaloes'.

When Thao asked her parents for permission to attend high school, they told her she must choose between marriage at the age of 17 or 18 or completing her education. 'My parents,' she explained, 'said once I've come

here to study, don't fall in love; once I started studying, I must study until the end, I must not drop out half-way to get married.' She continued: 'Once I decided to choose the path of studying, I never dream of getting married. I just try to study. I'm not afraid of not having a husband to marry. I will live by myself like the school's principal, it will be OK.' She plans, she added, on returning to the commune to teach when she is out of school. 'I plan that after grade 12, after graduation, I want to take the university entrance exams. I want to become a primary school teacher.'

6.4 Child marriage and boys

There is little doubt that Hmong girls pay the greatest price for child marriage. First, as brides are typically one or two years younger than grooms, girls are more likely to marry as children. Second, because getting married in the Hmong community is synonymous with 'becoming a daughter-in-law', and daughters-in-law are the most over-worked and the least-valued members of the family, child marriage effectively ends not only girls' childhoods but any semblance of a personal life they may have had. This includes their educational aspirations. While it is not uncommon for married boys to attend school, especially given recent initiatives to promote higher education, Hmong wives are not allowed to go to school.

That said, it is clear that Hmong boys also suffer from child marriage. Many of the students at the high school knew boys who had left school as early as sixth grade in order to marry (see Box 16). A few, the youngest, are made by their parents to marry so that a daughter-in-law's labour can be brought into the family. More boys clearly experience a great deal of pressure to do so. How much of that pressure is direct, with parents actively pushing their sons to marry, and how much is indirect, with sons feeling bound to bring labour into the family and seeing no reason to wait once they have left school, is unclear. What is obvious from our research, however, is that parents play a critical role in family formation, regardless of whether their children are girls or boys.

Box 16: Forced marriage, free labour

A young married boy was mentioned by two of this year's girl respondents.

One girl, from Can Chu Phin and currently the class president, explained that she was president this year because the boy who had been president dropped out last year in sixth grade at the age of 13. His wife had just given birth.

The other, 17 and a student at the high school, explained further. She said, 'I saw a grade 6 boy at the age of 12 or 13 who got married a girl aged 19 or 20. His parents forced him to marry her so she would do housework for them, picking vegetables on the mountain.'

As noted previously, given that boys are, one way or another, responsible for forming the vast majority of new families, understanding how and why they feel that marriage is desirable has implications for programming that protects adolescent girls from marriages they rarely seem to feel are well-timed. Boys who are pushed by their parents clearly need tools of resistance (see Box 17). As one 17-year-old high school girl noted, 'children from the commune obey their parents all the time, so this issue should be talked about more' so that children are not forced to marry. Boys facing more indirect pressure need help identifying their own positions in the family and learning how to prioritise longer-term family interests over the short-term interests that they often feel so acutely. The same 17-year-old girl suggested that 'talks are needed to convince them to abandon the idea of getting married early, concentrate on studying, so that they can help their homeland more.' Variations on this idea, perhaps emphasising that older, more educated boys make better husbands and fathers, are clearly also appropriate for boys who are interested in marriage because they believe themselves to be in love (see Box 18).

Box 17: Boys suffer from parental pressure to get married

'One of my classmates was forced by his parents to get married, we advised him to tell his parents to let him finish studying and find a job before getting married. He returned home and some weeks later he told us that his parents had stopped forcing him. He said that at the beginning, his parents insisted he get married at any cost. He was going to school and no one helped them do housework. But he kept telling his parents every day and they were convinced and no longer forced him. He also said that if they continued forcing him, he wouldn't return home and he would find a job to provide for his schooling on his own. His parents were afraid of the possibility. He has one younger sister and he is the only son of his parents, so they were afraid that he would abandon them.'

(17-year-old girl)

Box 18: Young love

'Down in my area, I have a friend who went to grade eight with me; she's married. She dropped out to get married at only 14-15 years old. [She] married my uncle. I was a bit disappointed with my uncle; his studies weren't going anywhere. He said he wouldn't study; it would be for nothing. I advised him to study, and after finishing his studies, he could get married. He was embarrassed, but still got married. They went to the same school where they got to know each other. Her parents tried to prevent it and they didn't let them get married, but he kept going and helping with his girlfriend's family's work. During Tet, he didn't go home.'

(18-year-old boy)

6.5 Conclusions

While the programming offered by Meo Vac high school is, at this point, ad hoc, inconsistent, relatively shallow and poorly focused on messages beyond the law and population control, it offers a number of important insights regarding what male and female students need in order to be able to make smart choices regarding their educations and relationships. Students, for example, want detailed information. They know that babies born very young mothers are likely to be small and sickly. They know that consanguineous marriages can lead to deformity. They want to know how their own bodies work and some want to know how to have safe sex, although more want to know how to manage the conflicting emotions that adolescence brings so that they can live and study with the opposite sex without becoming distracted from their studies. Teachers admit that as well as not having the time to do justice to extra-curricular topics they are also simply not prepared for *this* sort of teaching. They want help on this front as much as their students.

The Hmong girls we interviewed at Meo Vac high school are hardly representative of their peers. Given how few Hmong students, girls in particular, make the transition to high school, their mere enrolment marks them as outliers in their community. But it also makes them role models who can help inspire their younger peers.

Also notable is the importance of targeting boys as 'victims' of child marriage in their own right. While the price boys pay for early marriage is low compared to that paid by girls, understanding and addressing boys' positioning in family formation opens a new window into preventing child marriage.

Lessons learned from Meo Vac High School:

- **Students and teachers would prefer dedicated clubs or classes to learn about SRH-type issues,** preferably delivered in single-sex environments by same-sex teachers. Classes need to include not only the detailed information that students are currently seeking out on the internet, but also discussions about the emotions that accompany sexual development. This will require more holistic programming, such as the sexuality education curriculum developed by UNESCO,[23] that extends

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23 For details see www.unesco.org/new/en/hiv-and-aids/our-priorities-in-hiv/sexuality-education

beyond simple legal and health issues and provides students with the smaller face-to-face interactions that invite questions. Teachers would like specialists to handle this.

- **Commune officials and teachers are well placed to help girls and boys fight for their right to an education and their right to not marry as children.** Teaching girls to seek out other community adults when their own families deny them their rights clearly works.

- **Adolescents can also play an important advocacy role.** Some adolescents are developing strong feelings about intergenerational differences and are willing to help their friends advocate for their own interests. They are drawing clear lines in their own minds about the differences between the outdated customs of the past and the way things ought to be. Helping students delineate what their cohort of modern Hmong might look like – or simply giving them the space to do so on their own – may have powerful knock-on effects as students discover the strength that builds as 'I' becomes 'we'.

- **Hmong high school students could be important peer-to-peer mentors.** Hmong high school students – especially girls who have fought for their right to an education – have powerful stories that could be used to inspire their younger peers. Organising them to speak to lower-secondary students, even those from different communes who do not know them personally, offers a way to solidify their own commitment to future-seeking, but also encourages it in younger girls in the most potent way possible.

- **Recognising boys' role in child marriage offers new programming opportunities.** As the instigators of marriage in almost all cases, boys need help in identifying and understanding their motivations for marriage and finding ways to transmute them to fit into their own broader goals for the future.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

Drawing on the extensive primary research evidence base that we have developed over the past three years, we now have an in-depth understanding of the complexities of Hmong adolescent girls' lives and the ways in which the gendered social norms that influence their life trajectories are evolving unevenly over time. We have also developed useful insights into the personal, familial and community-level factors which enable some girls to push back against the traditions which confine them to home and land – as well as the ways in which governmental and NGO programming is helping more girls avoid early marriage and access their right to education. Based on our research we have a broad array of observations and conclusions relating to how to target policy and programming to address Hmong girls' disadvantages.

7.1 Conclusions

In regard to education, we note that:

- **Access to, and uptake of, schooling has changed tremendously in a short timeframe**. Most Hmong children now complete ninth grade because of a confluence of two factors: schools are now available and villages began to enforce attendance through locally agreed upon fines. Most Hmong families are now both committed to educating their children through ninth grade and see it as the 'new normal' – shame is increasingly attached to families who do not educate their children.
- **Most girls would like to expand their educational horizons and attend high school.** They appear to be more interested in doing so than their male peers and are far more committed to their education than their parents. Moreover, girls are largely seen – by children, parents and teachers – as better students than boys.
- **However, parents' capacity to engage with education/schools is limited due to time poverty, illiteracy and language issues.** Existing programming is doing relatively little to change this reality and as such constitutes are key gap.

In regard to child marriage, we note that:

- **Child marriage is becoming less common; most Hmong girls appear to marry at 18 or 19.** This is because arranged marriages are now uncommon and bride kidnapping is becoming rarer. There has been heavy messaging regarding both the law and health-related consequences of child marriage.
- **But child marriage remains far from rare.** While it is hard to obtain accurate data because Hmong couples do not register marriages until they are old enough to legally do so, the marriage of older teens (those aged 16 and 17) is not unusual and there are still some girls who are married as young as 13. Moreover, in some families, girls are getting married younger than their mothers, primarily because with access to schools they have more opportunities to interact with the opposite sex. Bride kidnapping has not been abolished and primarily affects the most vulnerable: girls from the least educated families in the most remote villages.
- **Child marriages are driven less by honour than a need for labour.** It is not shameful for girls to be unmarried and girls of 20 are not seen as unmarriageable. This is important because it means that girls who do not marry as children do not face social consequences.

- **Hmong boys also marry as children.** While in some cultures it is common for adolescent girls to marry older men, among the Hmong this is not the case. Hmong partners are nearly always the same age – meaning that for every 14-year-old married Hmong girl there is almost certainly a 14 or 15-year-old married Hmong boy.
- **Child marriage is driven by boys.** Even in the case of 'love' matches, contact is solely initiated by boys as it culturally unacceptable for girls to like boys first. Boys have many incentives to marry early and little reason to wait once they have left school. Their workloads are reduced by bringing home a wife and their social status improves.
- **Girls have fewer incentives to marry early than boys** as the work involved in being a daughter-in-law is typically far more significant than the work involved in being a daughter. Given any other option – especially going to high school – few girls would agree to marry young.
- **Fines for early marriage are rarely implemented** but often talked about as threatening and shameful. Local officials sometimes help 'hide' illegal child marriages to ensure that married girls and their children are not further deprived of their rights. Because access to birth certificates, health care and schooling can be constrained for those in violation of the Marriage Law, health officials omit the ages of girls they know to be too young to be married.

In regard to the constraints facing Hmong families, we note that:

- **Hmong parents are stressed not only poverty but by extreme poverty.** They have limited non-agricultural options, poor agricultural options and little-to-no 'spare' time. They are rarely literate and the women rarely speak Vietnamese. All of these factors work to prevent parents from imagining that their children's lives could be different from their own.
- **Hmong girls are deeply constrained by filial piety** and want to help their parents by working alongside them all the time. Only rarely can girls imagine disobeying their parents, even when they see that doing so might be in their parents' own best longer-term interests. Only the rarest girls can see – much less voice – that their own interests might deviate from those of their parents.
- **Hmong boys, while less constrained by filial piety, also want to help their parents by marrying sooner rather than later**. This desire to help their parents does not, however, appear to translate into a stronger commitment to education or a greater willingness to take on more domestic work.

In regard to the commitment evidenced by the national government, we note that:

- **Infrastructural improvements have been critical.** The geography of Hmong communities is difficult and yet roads and transportation infrastructure is improving in leaps and bounds, opening up new economic possibilities and reducing time poverty.
- **Due to government programming, hunger – if not malnutrition – is less common despite continuing soil degradation and erosion.** This reduces families' fears, which may leave them more cognitive space to imagine new ideas.
- **Villages' access to educational infrastructure has exploded**: more kindergartens are introducing greater numbers of children to Vietnamese earlier, and more lower-secondary schools are sparing greater numbers of young children from unsafe travel—especially when they offer boarding during the school week. The government has also done an exceptional job in providing ethnic minority children with ethnic minority teachers. Nearly half of all teachers in Ha Giang, for example, are ethnic minority. The dearth of Hmong teachers in Hmong communities reflects a real lack of supply, not a lack of sensitivity on the part of the government.
- N**ational-level leaders and policies are working to balance larger development goals with recognition of ethnic minority differences**. They are not blind to the tension inherent in protecting minority rights to self-determination and culture while simultaneously working to eliminate 'backward' customs that are damaging to people and the environment.
- **The government's messages regarding gender equality are mixed.** While equality is a longstanding national goal – especially in regard to women's public roles – the ways in which policy often works to reinforce women's private roles dilutes overall impact. Moreover, gender equality

initiatives are insufficiently tailored to address the specific realities of ethnic minority women and girls.

- **Government actions have highlighted its commitment to the inclusive growth that will be required for future progress**: for example, Resolution 80 NQ-CP (Directions for Sustainable Poverty Reduction) and Decision 449/QD-TTg (the Ethnic Minority Affairs Strategy).[24] However, these remain relatively gender-blind, reflecting a broader government tendency to pay inadequate attention to the intersection between gender and ethnic inequalities.

In regard to the local capacity for innovation and implementation, we note that:

- **Law enforcement is effective to some extent.** Driven by national-level policy, villages across Meo Vac have implemented a system of fines for truancy and child marriage that have proven instrumental to reductions in both—though especially the first.. While space for fines is limited by headmen's desire to be liked and families' ability to pay, the shame that is attached to violating the law is significant – and useful.
- **Simple social accountability mechanisms to improve education quality can have far-reaching effects.** Lao Cai's DOET's decision to immediately scale-up the mailbox project once it became clear that it was fostering better communication between children and teachers is notable and laudatory.
- **Local leadership and vision can have transformational effects.** Man Than's leadership, perhaps in part due to its longer exposure to NGO programming, has fostered 'future-seeking' behaviour that is evident in everyone we spoke to. Man Than is not just a commune moving *away* from the past, it is moving *towards* a better tomorrow. This was a palpable difference from other communes in which we have worked. There is evidence that local officials can be and are responsive to girls' needs – inspiring them in regard to their futures, willing to help them negotiate admission to high school and threatening to penalise their parents for non-compliance. There is also evidence that local officials can, and are, tackling norms head-on, teaching girls to *not* blindly obey their parents with regard to their education.

In regard to child development, we note that:

- **Programming does not pay enough attention to the basic precepts of child development**. Children are children and their capacity to understand abstract concepts such as rights is limited by their age. This means that care needs to be taken to make messages very local and very concrete. The 'right to participation' means nothing to a child. 'The right to go to school' does. To maximise uptake, care needs to be taken to embed all messages in the medium that best speaks to children: play.
- **Programming does not pay enough attention to recent advances in brain science,** which confirm thousands of years of adults' observations: adolescent decisions are products of their biological age (Steinberg, 2014). Increasing awareness of the opposite sex, their bodies and their desires leaves them vulnerable to snap decisions that are shaped in the case of the Hmong community by a history of early family formation and a complete lack of information and contraception for the unmarried. Messages and programming need to be tailored not according to political goals, and not solely to cultural norms, but also taking into account that adolescents are children too.

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24 Decision 449 calls for accelerating poverty reduction in ethnic minority areas by prioritising them for investments in infrastructure, education, etc. Resolution 80 is aimed at strengthening and harmonising social assistance programming in order to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty

Based on our research, these are policy and programming options that we see as especially viable in terms of addressing Hmong girls' many vulnerabilities:

Problem	Policy or programming solution to consider
Hmong girls, especially those in the most remote hamlets, struggle with **Vietnamese language** to a degree which compromises their education and limits their aspirations.	Universal kindergarten for more and earlier exposure to Vietnamese. Consideration should be given to strengthening and lengthening this class so that children are able to follow lesson in Vietnamese from grade 1. Full-day, rather than half-day, school increases children's exposure to Vietnamese – and also maximises their exposure to aspirations beyond subsistence agriculture. While mother-tongue education is hampered by the reality that there are not enough Hmong speaking teachers available to even begin to address needs, a possible solution is to train local ninth grade graduates as teaching assistants, especially for the youngest children, perhaps following the model developed by Save the Children[25]. This would not only bridge the language gap in classrooms, but has the added advantage of providing girls and young women with the paid employment that increases decision-making and incentivises them and their families to avoid child marriage. Adult literacy classes are important to help girls who are already out of school.
Parents – especially mothers – are **labour constrained** and cannot give up the labour inputs of their older children.	Better poverty programming, perhaps in the form of the conditional cash transfers which will soon be rolling out in Ha Giang, ought to simultaneously incentivise parents to support their children's educations and reduce poverty. Continue to look for entry points to reduce labour including better roads that allow for motorbikes, electricity, mechanisation of household and agricultural chores, etc. Consider following the lead of Mexico's *Prospera*[26] cash transfer programme and offering higher stipends to Hmong girls. Adolescent girls are especially productive for their parents, which makes them especially difficult for parents to give up, but because many dream of becoming teachers, the pay-out for investing in their schooling is quite high. Invest in programming aimed at balancing domestic workloads between girls and boys and men and women. This would almost certainly have to be built around helping boys and men take pride in their ability to work hard, provide for their families and give their children options that were not available to them (see Hoang et al., 2013). International learning could be drawn on, including the now global network MenEngage (Barker, 2000 and Barker et al., 2007). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) programming needs to recognise the unique needs of poor ethnic minority women and ensure that they are met. For example, loans to help women purchase labour saving equipment, such as corn grinders, may reduce women's and girls' time poverty.

25Detail at: 1) http://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/eenet_newsletter/news12/page15.php, 2) http://www.mlenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2011%20SC%20CfBT%20Research%20Report.pdf
26 Formerly called Opportunidades

The **cost of education** is too high for most Hmong families.	SDG policy needs to fully recognise the role of education in achieving equitable growth. Policy must account not only for differences in ethnic minority groups, but also for specific gender disadvantage within those groups. For ethnic minority groups who are lagging educationally, it would be advisable to eliminate all educational fees and ensure that the full costs of education, including the 'extra classes' increasingly required for academic success, are covered by stipends.
Hmong culture is comparatively static and held in place by **geographic isolation**.	Transition to full-day schooling as soon as possible to help children increase their exposure to the wider world. Support the establishment of clubs and sports activities that enable children to develop their own youth culture. Offer the handful of Hmong girls already enrolled in high school the opportunity to show their younger peers what Hmong girls can do through peer-to-peer mentoring initiatives. Building bridges between high school students and lower-secondary schools would foster leadership skills in older girls and provide younger girls with the role models they desperately want and need. This could represent a good opening for Plan, Oxfam and other NGOs. Investigate the model used by the North Carolina Teaching Fellows (Henry et al., 2012) to increase the number of Hmong teachers. That programme has offered free university tuition in exchange for teachers working in disadvantaged communities. This ought to be especially practical given that most Hmong girls already want to become teachers and very few wish to live anywhere other than the communes in which they grew up. Invest in internet connectivity for schools in order to broaden girls' horizons. Develop messages and programming for both children and parents built around fostering intergenerational change as a way of reducing intergenerational poverty. While care must be taken to avoid alienating parents and to ensure that children maintain pride in their Hmong heritage, there is at least anecdotal evidence that when community leaders tell children that there are times that they should NOT listen to their parents, such as when they are told to leave school, children listen. As the number of Hmong graduates in the Women's Union slowly expands, look for opportunities to use them as role models to deliver messages more powerfully. They would be ideally situated to host girls' clubs, especially for out-of-school girls, and should be compensated for their work in order to make it clear that their work is valued by the government. School counsellors, who help children proactively imagine longer-term educational trajectories and then assist them in making transitions could help more children feel supported to break with tradition – and would ensure that none are left behind because they do not have parental support for paperwork. Hmong role models would again be ideally situated for this role – though NGOs could also play an important role.
Filial piety drives children to ignore their longer-term interests for the	For children to want to continue their educations, schooling must be desirable. This means that content must be seen as relevant and methods as participatory. Anecdotal evidence also indicates that children are very responsive to good

parents' shorter-term interests.	meals, warm bedding and time for recreation. Making semi-boarding school an option for as many children as possible may help in the short term.

Schooling must be free and all user fees eliminated so that parents' only costs are opportunity costs, minimising the intergenerational debt that children perceive.

As noted above, develop messages and programming built around fostering intergenerational change as a way of reducing intergenerational poverty. A key entry point for girls would be girls' clubs – though given the critical importance of boys and men in the Hmong community, it is also vital to work with boys, perhaps through boys' clubs, to ensure that the next generation of men have broad horizons.

Local authorities are well placed to mediate the impact of filial piety because they effectively 'outrank' parents in terms of respect due in some regards. They should be encouraged to informally interact with children as they go about their daily lives so that girls know they are there as a 'safety net' if their parents deny them their rights. To the extent that local authorities are able to use small, informal interactions to encourage and inspire girls, they are also likely to 'plant seeds' for new ideas. |
| **Lack of non-agricultural jobs**. | Hmong adolescents need access to high-quality vocational education that teaches relevant skills that can translate into decently-paid employment.

Given that the Hmong do not migrate, investigate whether there is scope to expand employment options in district centres. Evidence suggests that Kinh families living in the northern mountains have far more diversified incomes and are much less poor. Helping the Hmong to capitalise on some of the advantages currently held by the Kinh could reduce both income and time poverty and expand Hmong future-seeking.

Given that Hmong families tend to be located further from roads and have less financial and educational capital than their Kinh neighbours, the government should also continue to invest in infrastructure, make loans to small businesses and provide vocational training in Hmong communities.

In order to improve Hmong ownership of messages and modernisation, ensure that space is made for Hmong graduates in local power structures. Given clear evidence that Women's Union and Youth Union officials are overworked, there is space for new hiring to meet this goal.

Policy aimed at inclusive growth needs to consider not only ethnicity, but also gender. Hmong women need access to the income streams that have been shown to improve decision-making and intra-household bargaining power. |
| **Child marriage** continues to restrict the lives of many. | Evidence suggests that existing messages regarding the law and health risks are pervasive and well understood. Accordingly, such messaging should be continued.

Invest in programming for boys, who are the future husbands as well as the drivers of child marriage. Boys need to understand their own motivations for marriage and be helped to find ways to ameliorate the pressures they feel.

Invest in programming for boys as brothers – not just in terms of 'would you want your sister dragged off', but also in terms of the potential payback to their |

natal parents if their sisters are educated enough and successful enough to share the burden of parental care.

Address marriage by kidnapping in particular and child marriage in general by offering girls practical lessons with myriad opportunities to practice new skills – such as saying no to boys, demanding to go home to boys' parents and fighting back and escaping if necessary. Even when adolescents have been told what to do in a given situation, they are often unable to follow through, especially when under stress. Role-playing kidnapping and marriage proposals gives girls the opportunity to develop at least a simulation of real-world skills. Offering girls and boys different roles in these simulations lets the larger bulk of girls – and boys – develop the language and skills to step in when their sisters and friends need their support. (These skills could also be useful in terms of helping girls resist trafficking to China.)

Given that clubs for girls and boys have proven to be successful venues for this life skills education – in Viet Nam and around the world – it is critical that clubs and other forms of participatory programming are made available to all children – not just the best and brightest.

Can Chu Phin's Plan-facilitated child protection board, which sends child brides home when they show up in marital homes, is a powerful idea that should be better integrated with local programming and power structures and then replicated. The 'village-level social collaborators' envisioned to help implement the new conditional cash transfer are ideally placed for this (World Bank, 2013).

Shame is a powerful motivator for Hmong parents and evidence suggests that it is already helping parents behave differently. It is worth investigating whether and how shame might be leveraged to ensure that boys' parents, who are aware of child marriages from the first day since boys bring girls to their parents' homes, insist too-young unions be ended immediately.

A national database of children, currently under development, will make each child visible instantly – making it all but impossible to hide their age at marriage (World Bank, 2013). However, if it begins with the youngest children, its impact will not be fully felt for years. Care must be taken, as the database comes online, to ensure that when Hmong children do marry they and their children are not penalised by withholding necessary services such as health care and education.

A case management system that follows orphans carefully would help reduce child marriage significantly. Orphans are typically acutely aware of the fact that they are a burden on their caregivers and are therefore the most vulnerable to filial piety – which drives them to leave school and marry as soon as possible.

Programming that addresses ethnic customs, social norms and national law – especially when that national law is all too often focused on 'social evils' – ignores the reality that adolescents who believe themselves in love are a difficult force to reckon with. Programming built on brain science and developmental psychology is required in order to reach children. Adolescents who are expected to remain unmarried also need access to quality SRH information and affordable contraception.

Alcoholism and domestic violence are prevalent in the Hmong community.	Children need to be taught that they have a right to live in a violence-free environment and that they should get help when they need it. The mailboxes at school may provide a convenient way for children to seek assistance. Programming needs to be aimed at children to reduce the incidence of violence in the next generation. Girls need to learn that they need not be victims and boys need to hear that their masculinity can be expressed in other ways, perhaps through boys' clubs as above (see Hoang et al., 2013).

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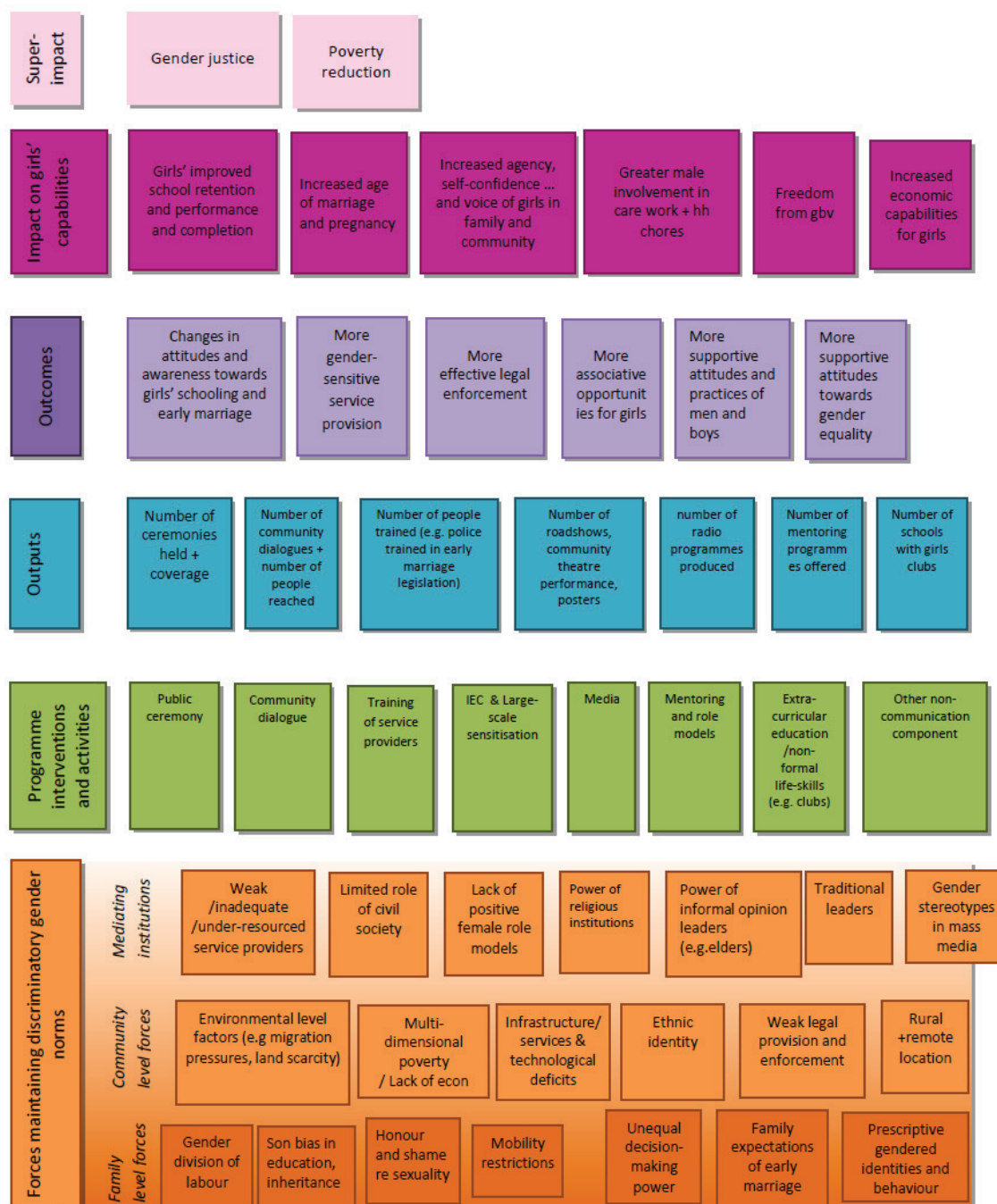Lemoine, J. (2012) 'Commentary: Gender-based Violence among the (H)mong'. *Hmong Studies Journal* 13: 1-27.

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Annex 1: Log-frame theory of change model, ODI

Super-impact	Gender justice	Poverty reduction				

Impact on girls' capabilities	Girls' improved school retention and performance and completion	Increased age of marriage and pregnancy	Increased agency, self-confidence … and voice of girls in family and community	Greater male involvement in care work + hh chores	Freedom from gbv	Increased economic capabilities for girls

Outcomes	Changes in attitudes and awareness towards girls' schooling and early marriage	More gender-sensitive service provision	More effective legal enforcement	More associative opportunities for girls	More supportive attitudes and practices of men and boys	More supportive attitudes towards gender equality

Outputs	Number of ceremonies held + coverage	Number of community dialogues + number of people reached	Number of people trained (e.g. police trained in early marriage legislation)	Number of roadshows, community theatre performance, posters	number of radio programmes produced	Number of mentoring programmes offered	Number of schools with girls clubs

Programme interventions and activities	Public ceremony	Community dialogue	Training of service providers	IEC & Large-scale sensitisation	Media	Mentoring and role models	Extra-curricular education /non-formal life-skills (e.g. clubs)	Other non-communication component

Forces maintaining discriminatory gender norms

Mediating institutions	Weak /inadequate /under-resourced service providers	Limited role of civil society	Lack of positive female role models	Power of religious institutions	Power of informal opinion leaders (e.g.elders)	Traditional leaders	Gender stereotypes in mass media

Community level forces	Environmental level factors (e.g migration pressures, land scarcity)	Multi-dimensional poverty / Lack of econ	Infrastructure/ services & technological deficits	Ethnic identity	Weak legal provision and enforcement	Rural +remote location

Family level forces	Gender division of labour	Son bias in education, inheritance	Honour and shame re sexuality	Mobility restrictions	Unequal decision-making power	Family expectations of early marriage	Prescriptive gendered identities and behaviour

Annex 2: Research instruments

1. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII): NATIONAL LEVEL

Government ministries/ development partners

Targets: Ministries of Gender, Education and Health; DPs supporting programmes

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Background information to collect

ID [to be decided per country – but could be name or initials]	
Ministry or Agency	
Function	
Gender	

Key questions (to be adapted as needed)

1. Key developments in terms of addressing early marriage, teen pregnancy and under-investment in girls' education, including through communication interventions
2. Key challenges remaining
3. Programming landscape – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats
   a including coordination across actors; sustainability of interventions; funding; grappling with social norms; exit strategies
4. Examples of successful programmes. Ingredients of success? M&E quality/quantity?
5. Examples of communications approaches. Ingredients of success? M&E quality/quantity?
6. Knowledge sharing mechanisms in the field of early marriage, teen pregnancy and girls' education? How could these be strengthened?

Programme managers

Target: Managers of case study programmes

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Basic information to collect

ID [to be decided per country – but could be name or initials]	
Agency	
Function	
Time in function	
Gender	

Key questions (to be adapted as needed): A focus on the communications component (s) – linked to other programme components if multi-pronged programmes.

1. Basics? (aims, duration, budget, staffing levels, capacities, partners)
2. How long have you been involved in the programme? What is your role in the programme?
3. How did you get involved?
4. What were the origins of the programme? (national HQ, international good practice, scaled up from a project)
5. Relevance to national policy? Which one is it trying to contribute to?
6. What was the programme design process? Were you involved and if so, how? Were local beneficiaries involved in the design and if so how?
7. Does the programme design consider social norms, if so, how?
8. Have the objectives of the programme been met? Have there been unexpected results/impacts? Overall, what have been the key achievements or what do you think they will be? How do you measure this?
   a Do you have a logframe/TOC? Did you do a baseline? What indicators do you use? How were they developed (by you, your partners, your beneficiaries)? What M&E have you undertaken? How are the results of monitoring fed back into the on-going programme to improve it?
9. Do you think the relative effectiveness of the communications component is due to its strength alone or because it is part of a broader package of interventions?
10. What sort of support do you get from other staff or agencies, if any? Strengths/weaknesses of that support?
11. Coordination with other relevant interventions in the sector; issues of decentralisation
12. Opportunities for strengthening going forward
13. Barriers to full achievement of original goal / ongoing challenges
14. Exit strategy/sustainability strategy
15. If you had an opportunity to scale up, what would you keep, what would you do differently?

2. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII) SUBNATIONAL LEVEL

KIIs with local government and development partners

Target: Local government at district and sub-county level; relevant sector officials, traditional authorities, women's civil society organisations / CBOs – also to secure entry/approval to communities

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Background information to collect

ID [to be decided per country – but could be name or initials]	e.g. CM 1 Iganga
Department/agency	
Role/function	
Link to programme	
Gender	

Key questions (to adapt as appropriate)

1. Background on socio-economic conditions, social services and key development trends and challenges in the district/locality
2. What are the key concerns relating to child marriage, teenage pregnancy and under-investment in girls' education?
3. What are key developments in terms of addressing child marriage, teenage pregnancy and under-investment in girls' education?
4. Key challenges remaining
5. Programming landscape – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats
   a Extent to which programmes are adequately tailored to local context or one-size-fits all model adopted?
   b What communication strategies are being used by the programmes and effective are they?
   c including coordination across actors
   d sustainability of interventions
   e source funding, adequacy
   f what social norms are they addressing and how? (How effective are communications strategies in addressing social norms around child marriage and education?)
   g what exit strategies and sustainability plans have the programmes adopted?
6. Examples of successful programmes. Ingredients of success? M&E systems and indicators?
7. What sort of knowledge sharing mechanisms exist in the field of early marriage and girls' education? How could this be strengthened?

KIIs with programme implementers

Targets: Those connected to case study programmes

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Basic information to collect

ID [to be decided per country – but could be name or initials]	e.g. CM 1 Iganga
Role/function within programme	
How long involved in programme	
Previous experience	
Gender	

Key questions
1. What do you think are the key issues facing adolescent girls in this community?
2. How did you get involved in the programme? How long have you been involved? What is your role?
3. Did you receive training for this role? What did you do before you started this job?
4. What were the origins of the programme? Did it originate in this region or suggested from capital of the country or was it suggested from an international agency?
5. What are the main programme objectives?
6. What was the process for programme design? Were local stakeholders involved in the design? If so how? To what extent do you think it is effectively tailored for adolescent girls?
7. To what extent was the role of social norms taken into consideration? Probe for the specific social norms around child marriage and education that are being addressed?
8. What communication strategies / approached are being used? How effective are they in addressing social norms around child marriage and education

9. What have been the key achievements or what do you think they will be?
10. Have the objectives of the program been met, have there been unexpected results/impact?
11. Can you comment on the relative merits of the different programme components in achieving impact (communication vs others)?
12. How do you measure this? To what extent do you think social norms are changing as a result?
13. Did you do a baseline? What indicators do you use? What sorts of M&E have you undertaken? How were findings utilised?
14. To whom do you have to report and according to what format? (What are your reporting mechanisms/requirements?)
15. What are the challenges in implementing the programme?
16. Is the funding adequate to meet your objectives?
17. What sort of support do you get from the national level (donors, ministries, regional/national offices, etc.), if any? Strengths/weaknesses of that support?
18. Coordination with other relevant interventions in the sector
19. Opportunities for strengthening going forward
20. Challenges to full achievement of original goal
21. Exit strategy/sustainability strategy.

3. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDs), COMMUNITY LEVEL

Beneficiaries (direct or indirect) Women and men / girls and boys

Targets: People directly or indirectly involved in/affected by the programme/ representative of the target population that the programme is aiming at – either the girls themselves and their relatives, or fathers as target group and their daughters

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Background information to collect

Location	
Type of group (women/men; boys/girls, beneficiaries/non-beneficiaries, etc)	
Numbers of participants	
Ethnicity/religion	
Age ranges	
Marital status	
Livelihoods/employment	
Education levels (in school or out-of school for adolescents)	

Key questions

1. What are your perceptions about early marriage and girls' education in this community? Is it a problem? How significant? Is everyone affected? What are the causes and consequences?
2. What role do social norms play in perpetuating these problems?
3. Are there activities/programmes going on to address the problem of early marriage and girls' limited educational opportunities?
4. How effective are these in your view? Why?

5. You are participants in X programme – can you please describe your involvement, activities, experiences, reasons for involvement, why, when?
6. List activities participants have been involved in and then use most significant change tool below.
7. What was your life like before the programme? What has changed in your life (reference to private and public) after programme X?

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For adolescent girls and boys only

Time use

Economic worries

Labour engagement (chores and economic activities)

Relations within the family – with parents and siblings and other relatives

Self-confidence

Better psycho-social wellbeing /less pressure/stress

Friends and social networks

Mobility

Choice/ agency /decision-making/voice

School attendance

Less stigma

Perceptions about marriage / marriage relations /including desired age of marriage

Freedom from violence

Expanded sense of opportunities/ aspirations/ vision for future

Other?

</div>

2. Were there any negative effects?
3. Where there any unexpected effects? 'What surprised you most from this programme?'
4. What else do you think is necessary to improve the/your situation regarding girls' education and early marriage?
5. What is needed to ensure that the positive effects of the programme you described last beyond the end of the programme?
6. What would you recommend to improve the programme?
7. How can programmes help you play a more supportive role in your daughters/sisters life?
8. What other programmes or interventions do you think would be useful to address these problems?
9. What other communications programmes do you think would be useful?

At the end of the interview, note down how the process went: Was it participatory? Did everyone take part in the discussion? Did anyone dominate? Did anyone walk out, why? Was it difficult / easy to manage, why? Were people comfortable / uncomfortable, why? etc.

FGD with community mapping

Target: Adult community members: elders, religious leaders, teachers, nurses/health extension workers, etc. (non-govt)

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Background information to collect

Location	
Type of group (women/men; elders; religious leaders	
Numbers of participants	
Ethnicity/religion	
Age ranges	
Marital status	
Livelihoods/employment	

Questions

1. Community context and history, power relations, donor /NGO programme interventions
8. Understanding of gender division of labour, gender relations teen pregnancy and education (problems causes, consequences)
9. What are the key issues affecting around child marriage?
10. Most significant gendered change in terms of early marriage and girls' education (timeline)
11. Do focused timeline on early marriage and girls' education (add programme in as appropriate) and discuss reasons for these changes over time with them
12. What do you know about the programme? What communication methods were used? What was most powerful to you?
13. To what extent has XX programme contributed to change? How? Evidence? What do you think about the programme?
14. Has there been any negative effects/backlash/practice being driven underground etc?
15. Perceived differences between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (where beneficiaries are clearly identifiable).
16. To what extent have you been involved or linked to the programme? Quality of interaction.

At the end of the interview, note down how the process went: Was it participatory; did everyone take part in the discussion; did anyone dominate? Did anyone walk out, why? Was it difficult / easy to manage, why? Were people comfortable / uncomfortable, why? etc.

4. IN-DEPTH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS (IDIs) / CASE STUDIES

Target: Programme beneficiaries (boys or girls – direct or indirect beneficiaries)

Introduction

We are exploring how people in this community are affected by early marriage and efforts to increase girls' schooling and your perceptions and experiences of XX programme. We are talking with men, women, boys and girls to understand how current programme support in Vietnam is functioning and ways in which it could be strengthened. We think your views are very important and should inform discussions around policies and programmes that aim to improve individual and community wellbeing. We'll be writing a report – there won't be any immediate effects but longer-term we would hope that your views will be included.

Basic information to include

ID [to be decided per country – but could be name or initials]	e.g. CM 1 Iganga
Age	

Gender	
Ethnicity and religion	
Place of birth/residence	
Marital status (if children, how many)	
Education status (in school/out-of school/level)	
Household livelihood	
Occupation	

Ice-breaker – Aspirations and hindrances and what could make it better? If they are not forthcoming, then can ask them to rank from the following – e.g. 3 most important in their life and why?

- School – subject choice, up to what level
- Marriage and family – age at marriage; choice of partners, number of children, relationship with husband, in-laws
- Work opportunities
- Move residence – e.g. go to town
- Greater mobility
- Better house / land
- Other…

Questions

1. When and why did you decide to become involved in the programme? How did it come about? How were you selected? Are you still involved in the programme?
2. Were you involved in programme design?
3. What do you think the programme's key aims are? How important do you think these aims are? Why do you think this programme is needed?
4. How did your family react to your participation in the programme? Did anyone object and if so, why?
5. What activities have you undertaken as part of the programme? What do you like best? What do you least enjoy? (Probe for communication and non-communication)
6. How have you interacted with the programme implementers?
7. Changes after the intervention?

Individual Level: How has it affected you? (Prompt as per the below.) Which components were most important?
- Time use
- Economic worries
- Labour engagement
- Self-confidence
- Better psycho-social wellbeing /less pressure/stress
- Mobility
- Choice/ agency /decision-making/voice
- School attendance
- Less stigma
- Perceptions about marriage / marriage relations /including desired age of marriage
- Freedom from violence
- Expanded sense of opportunities/ aspirations/ vision for future
- Other?

Family level
- Shifts in relationships with parents, siblings, other relatives
- Changes in household division of labour

- Less pressure to get married
- More encouragement and support for school going and educational attainment
- Increased voice in family decision making and discussions
- Increased permission for mobility
- Parents aspirations for your future

Community level
- Friends and social networks
- Increased participation in group, associations, clubs and other activities
- Enhanced confidence for and exercise of leadership roles
- Increased mobility
- Increased voice and assertiveness vis-à-vis the community and community members
- Increased access to community resources
- Vis-à-vis community leaders and service providers:
- greater respect for girls, and esp. interest in tackling early marriage and promoting girls education, ensuring better protection for girls ;
- more gender and age sensitive and supportive teachers/ police officers/ health workers/ council workers/ district workers …etc.

1. What sorts of things do you think could have been done differently in the context of the programme? [depending on programme history]
2. Is the impact of the programme ongoing – are you still using the service/ skills etc.? why/why not?
3. To what extent do you see the programme contributing to your educational experience and aspirations? (Include discussion of vocational training)
4. Would you recommend programme participation to others?
5. What other kinds of support do you think would be important to you? (Ask participants to rank 3 they like and 3 they don't think would be feasible)
   a   Education based
   b   Economic and livelihoods
   c   Legal
   d   Sports and leisure
   e   Psycho-social/ emotional
   f   Health
   g   Out of school and vocational training
6. What other kinds of communication programme would be important to you?
   a   Radio broadcasts
   b   SMS messages
   c   TV programmes
   d   Street theatre and community events
   e   Community dialogues
   f   Posters

Annex 3: Poverty and median expenditure of major ethnic groups in rural areas, 2009 (Source: World Bank, 2012: 124)

	Ethnic Group	Poverty Headcount	Poverty Gap	MeanPer Capita Expenditures	Primary region
1	Kinh	17.0	3.6	12,145,000	—
2	Tay	46.5	13.0	9,918,800	N. Mountains
3	Thai	69.1	22.6	7,210,600	N. Mountains
4	Muong	56.3	16.8	8,603,800	N. Mountains
5	Khmera	43.2	11.6	9,976,300	Mekong Delta
6	Hoa	13.4	3.1	19,727,500	Mekong Delta
7	Nung	56.0	17.5	8,611,600	N. Mountains
8	Hmong	93.3	45.3	4,455,100	N. Mountains
9	Dao	75.6	27.9	6,456,900	N. Mountains
10	Gia Rai	81.9	32.2	5,754,600	C. Highlands
11	Ede	75.1	27.6	6,460,100	C. Highlands
12	Ba Na	86.2	36.6	5,311,400	C. Highlands
13	San Chay	57.2	17.0	8,263,300	N. Mountains
14	Cham	57.2	17.0	8,504,100	South-Central
15	Co Ho	76.2	28.1	6,329,300	C. Highlands
16	Xo-Dang	91.1	42.4	4,760,600	C. Highlands
17	San Diu	37.5	10.2	11,132,400	N. Mountains
18	Hre	79.1	26.2	6,294,400	C. Highlands
19	Ra Glai	84.9	31.1	5,716,200	South-Central
20	Mnong	80.9	32.9	5,828,000	C. Highlands

Source: Estimates based on poverty mapping methods described in Chapter 4 using 2010 VHLSS and 2009 Housing and Population Census.
Note: a. In Vietnamese, *Kho me*. The *H'Mông* and *Ê Đê* are also listed here by their common English names.

Annex 4: Policy review - Vietnam

	Social norms addressed? Give text and pg number	Comment on quantity and quality of consideration of social norms (e.g. one line vs multi-page discussion)	Gaps/ silences	Linkages to other sectors/issues
Education sector				
Law on Education 2005[27] 38/2005/QH11	- Maintaining good traditions and the nation cultural identity is one of the requirements of education materials (p2) - Teaching ethnic minority language in school is an way to maintain cultural identity of the ethic group (p3) - Ethic minorities students (among other target groups) have support from the Gov (fee exemption, nomination for higher education) (p4, p29) - Gov open boarding schools for ethnic minorities to develop local staff resources (p21)	- It is mentioned twice in related articles without further elaboration	- No mentioning of girls/boys or gender equality - No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…	
Law on Vocational Education 2006 (76/2006/QH11)	- Equipping students with professional knowledge, skills and attitudes (p2)	This is mentioned twice under definition of 'vocational education'.	'professional attitudes' is understood as disciplinary, hard work… No mentioning of gender, social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…	
National Targeted programme on education 2012-2015 (1210/QĐ-TTg)	- Support ethnic minority children to enrol school (p2) and support boarding schools in building classroom and equip with facilities (p9)	This is mentioned twice as an objective and as one the projects	No mentioning of gender, social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…	
Health sector				

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27 Education law's amendments in 2010 has no mentioning/adding anything regarding concerned topics

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Law on Health Check and Treatment (40/2009/QH12)	- The state give priority to health care in ethnic minority areas (p3 and p39)	This is mentioned twice under state policy and state budget on health care	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…
National Targeted Programme on Health 2012-2015 (1208/QĐ-TTg)	- Improve RH status of adolescence, reduce abortion rate among adolescence (p6) - Improve RH status of specific ethnic groups (p6) - Response timely to RH care needs of gender based violence victims (p7)	This is mentioned as objectives/activities under RH project.	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…
National Targeted Programme on Population and Family Planning 2012-2015 (1199/QĐ-TTg)	- Improve communication and changing behaviour to implement family planning policy (p5, p8). - Reduce the speed of increasing sex ration at birth (to 113 in 2015) (p2, p3, p5…) - Providing information and life skills on gender equality in RH care, consequences of early marriage… to adolescents and youth and prior-to-marriage couples (p6)	- This is mentioned twice as objective of project 3 'Building capacity, communication & monitoring ' & as a programme solutions - This is mentioned in several places - This is mentioned once as an activity of project 3 but no more elaboration	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…
Marriage and Family			
Marriage Law 2014[28] (52/2014/QH13)	- The law providing legal norms of conduct between family members (p1) - Inherit and promote good cultural traditions of the nation (p1) - Practice of marriage and family are rule of conduct concerning rights and obligation of the parties… which repeat in long time span and have widely recognized in a region or community (p2) - The state mobilizes people to remove backward customs and practice re marriage and family and to promote good traditions and practices which present identity of each ethnicity (p4) - In case there is no provision in the law and the parties have no deal then good practices re marriage and family presenting identity of each ethnicity and not contrary to the principles and not violate prohibitions of this law can be applied (p6).	This is mentioned under the scope of law This is mentioned under key principles of marriage and family This is mentioned under explaining terms used in the law and it is new compared to previous law (2000) This is mentioned under role of the state This is mentioned in a single article and it is more specific in terms of how to apply practices compared to previous Law.	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices…

28 In effect from January 1st 2015. Regarding the marriage age, there is a slight increase, which is female from full 18 year old and male from full 20 year old are eligible to marry (article 7).

	- The selection of place of living is due to husband and wife agreement, not binding to customs and practices and geographical areas (p9).	This is mentioned in a single article.
	- Husband and wife have the obligation to respect the right of freedom of belief and religion of each other (p9).	This is mentioned in a single article.
	- The State have policies to create conditions for generations within family to pay attention to, take care of and help each other in order to maintain and promote good traditions of Vietnamese families; encourage persons, organisations in the society to take part in maintaining and promoting good traditions of Vietnamese families (p36).	This is mentioned under rights and obligation of other family members.
Family Development Strategy to the year 2020, vision to 2030[29] (Decision N0 629/QĐ-TTg dated 29/5/2012 of the Prime Minister)	- Family is… key space to maintain and promote good cultural traditions (p1).	This is mentioned in a single article of views on family
	- To 2015, 90 percent of families to have received information and committed to implement well policies… and legal documents on family and gender equality, GBV… (p1).	This is mentioned as a target indicator
	- To maintain and promote good Vietnamese family traditions and receive selectively progressive values of family in a developed society… (p2, p3).	
	- To the year 2015, 80 percent of families have received recognition of 'cultural family' (p2).	This is mentioned twice as a target and as a communication measure
	- Give priority in resources to rural, poor… and ethnic minority areas (p3, p4).	This is mentioned as a target indicator
	- Integration, industrialization process have strong impact on families and may create potential	This is mentioned in several places as measure
		No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, social practices…
Gender Equality		
Law on Gender Equality (73/2006/QH 11)	- Definitions of gender stereotypes (p2)	This is mentioned in a single article re definitions of terms
	- Definitions of gender discrimination (p2)	
	- Applying appropriate measures to abolish out of date customs and practices which constraint the implementation of gender equality objectives (p3)	
	- Support gender equality activities in remote and ethnic minority areas (p3)	These are mentioned under the State policy regarding gender equality
	- Professional orientation, developing and disseminating of text book with gender stereotypes are violation of law (p16)	These 4 points are mentioned under violations of law
		No mentioning of girls/boys
		No mentioning of social norms and attitudes as such

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29 In effect since 2012. Regarding marriage age: Annually, to reduce 15% of family have members married under eligible age as a target.

85 In effect since 2012.

85

Document	Content	Notes	No mentioning
	- Developing, disseminating and publishing any product under any format which promoting gender discrimination and gender stereotypes (p17) - Constraining, not allowing someone to participate in health education due to gender stereotype (p17) - Constraining, not allowing someone to participate in the discussion on the use of family property or carrying out income generating activities or meeting family needs due to gender stereotype (p18) - Sons and daughters are taken care of, educated and facilitated by family on equal basis (p7)	This is mentioned under gender equality in the family	
National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011-2020 (Decision N0 2351/QD TTg dated 24/12/2010 of the Prime Minister)	- To the year 2015 reduce 60 percent and the year 2020 reduce 80 percent of cultural and information products with gender stereotypes (p3) - To the year 2015 there are 90 percent and the year 2020 there are 100 percent of radio and television agencies at national and provincial level have theme/topic on gender equality awareness raising (p4) - Boosting information, propaganda and educating to increase gender equality awareness among government staff, labour force and people (p5) - Enhancing gender equality propaganda on mass media in order to raise awareness on female cadres, helping in deleting gender stereotypes and inappropriate perceptions about woman's and man's role in the family and society (p6, p8, p12). Diversify images of women with different roles and professions (p6) - Review to delete messages and images with gender stereotypes in the current system of text book (p8) - Mention of vulnerable groups such as migrant, poor and ethnic minority women in providing social insurance (p7) - Mention of adolescents as target group of dissemination of information on reproductive health (p8)	These are two indicators under objective N0 5 gender equality in culture and information sector This is mentioned under general measures on implementation This is mentioned several times under measures on implementation of objective N0 1 & 5 This is mentioned under measures on implementation of objective N0 3	No mentioning of social norms, attitudes, value and social practice
Law on Domestic Violence Prevention	- Incorporate and implement in synchronisation domestic violence prevention measures, focus on propaganda, educating on family, advisory,	This is mentioned under domestic violence prevention principle	No mentioning of women/men or girls/boys No mentioning of social norms and attitudes

Policy	Content / key words	Notes	Assessment
02/2007/QH12	reconciling in accordance with cultural traditions, good customs and practice of the nation (p2)		
National Plan of Action on Domestic Violence Prevention to the year 2020 (Decision N0 215/QD-TTg dated 6/2/2014 of the Prime Minister)	Nothing found regarding key words		No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices… No mentioning of boys/girls, ethnic minority women/men

Poverty and Ethnic minority

Policy	Content / key words	Notes	Assessment
Support for sustainable Poverty Reduction of 61 Poor Districts (Decree N0 30a/2008/NQ-CP dated 27/12/2008) (Programme 30a)	- Building sustainable rural society with rich ethnic identities and improved people's knowledge…. (p1) - Expand the scope of policy on prioritized education, incl. nomination for ethnic minority pupils (p4) - Policy on training of local cadres (p4)	This is under overall objective of the programme These are under specific policies on education and training	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices… No mentioning of boys/girls, women/men
Programme 135 Phase 2 (2006-2010) N0 07/2006/QD-TTg dated 10/01/2006 Programme 135 Phase 3 (2012-2015 and to the year 2020) N0 551/QD-TTg dated 4/4/2013	- Improve material and spiritual life of ethnic minority in extreme difficult communes (p1) - Not found any key words - Not found any key words	Mentioned as overall objective of the programme	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices… No mentioning of boys/girls or women/men
Decree on Ethnic Affaires (N0 05/2011/NĐ-CP)	- … To ensure and promote equality, respect and maintain cultural identities of ethnic groups settled down in Vietnamese territories (p1)	This is under the scope of decree This is under the principle of ethnic affaire	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes and attitudes No mentioning of boys/girls or women/men except on p6

Dated 14/1/2011	- Make sure of maintaining the language, writing, ethnic identities, promoting good customs, practice, traditions and culture of every ethnic group (p 1) - Forbidden are the behaviours with stigma, discrimination… toward ethnicity (p3) - Language, writing and good traditions of ethnic minorities are included in the curriculums of schools appropriately to the ethnic area (p5) - Make sure of an appropriate proportion of ethic cadres, with given priority to female and the young participating in offices and political system at different levels (p6) - Support the colleting, researching, protection, maintaining and promoting good traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities (p6) - Support the protection and developing the writing of ethic groups with writing (p7) - Increase and improve quality of ethic language on mass media (p7) - Diversify the forms of legal education in an appropriate way with customs, practice of ethic minorities (p8)	This is under the forbidden behaviours This is under policy to promote education and training This is under policy to promote local ethic cadres This is under policy to conserve and develop culture This is under policy on information and communication This is under policy of legal education and support	
Land			
Land law 2013 N0 45/2013/QJ] 13	Developing policy for settlement land, commune land for ethnic minorities in accordance with customs, practice, cultural identity and local conditions in the area (p12)	This is under the state obligations re land for ethnic minorities	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value No mentioning of boys/girls or women/men
Land Inheritance (Chapter XXXIII); Inheritance by Law (Chapter XXIV); Function of the Code (Chapter I) of the Civil Code 2005 N0 33/2005/QH11 **Dated 14/6/ 2005**	In case there are legal provisions and the parties have no deal, can apply customs. The customs should not be against the principles given in this Code (p1) Nothing found regarding other key words	This mentioned under Chapter I Function of the Code	No mentioning of son/daughter or women/men

Youth and child			
Youth Law N0 53/2005/QH11 dated 29/11/2005	- Female and male youth are equal (p1) - The youth should maintain and promote good traditions of Vietnamese family (p5) - The state facilitates the youth to maintain and promote national cultural values… (p7) - Encourage and support ethnic minority youth to maintain and promote ethnic cultural identities (p8) - Single chapter (IV) on the protection of the youth from full 16 to under 18 year old (p10-11)	This is under rights and obligations of the youth in general and in marriage and family These two points are under responsibility of the State	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, social practices… No mentioning of boys/girls, women/men (except in p1)
Law on Protection, Care and Education of Children 25/2004/QH11 dated 15/6/2004	- Girls and boys… are equal in protection, care and education (p1) - Respect and maintain national cultural identities (p6) - Government issues policy to support children in ethnic minority, poor areas… (p11)	This is under article of no discrimination toward children This is under children's obligation This is under the state's obligation	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, social practices… No mentioning of boys/girls, women/men (except in p1)
Culture			
National Targeted Programme on Culture 2011-2015 (Decision N0 1211/QD-TTg dated 5/9/2012 of the Prime Minister)	Nothing found regarding key words Ethnic minority is mentioned several times regarding promoting traditional festivals. Children are mentioned several times regarding building playgrounds.		No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices… No mentioning of boys/girls
Other			
National Targeted Programme on Building New Rural Area 2011-2020 (Decision N0 800/QD-TTg dated 4/6/2010 of the Prime Minister)	- Building new rural area…. with rich national cultural identity (p1) - Maintain and develop local traditional village of handicraft (p 4) - To the year 2015, 30 percent of communes with cultural hall up to the standard and 45 percent of communes with post office and internet up to the standard (p6)	This is under general objective of the programme This is under economic development This is under information and cultural development	No mentioning of social norms, stereotypes, attitudes, value, social practices… No mentioning of women/men, boys/girls

Annex 5: Programme Mapping

Justification for fieldwork sites and description of sites

This year, the fieldwork is carried out in two sites: Meo Vac district, Ha Giang province and Simacai District, Lao Cai province, both from Northern mountainous region. The rationale for selection of these sites is to take full advantage of the previous year fieldwork which was carried out with Hmong community in Northern mountainous region. Both sites this year are location of community with many ethnic groups, mainly Hmong.

Meo Vac district is home of Hmong ethnic group, and it also was the site of the first and second year fieldwork.

Simacai is a bordering with China district with population of 34,128 people, 82.5% of which are Hmong, 12,2% are Nung and 5% other ethnic minority, and with under 0.3% of Kinh people (2009). There are 14% of over 18,200 people in the labour active age group have been trained at different levels (2013). The poverty rate of the district is 36% and rate of nearly poor is 17.7% (2013) among the highest of the province.[30] Primary school enrolment rate of children aged 6-14 is 98.5%, lower secondary school is 97.8% and enrolment rate of upper secondary school is 64.6%.

Justification for choice of programmes to be reviewed

We did a search of projects and programmes with communication component and with adolescents as one of the target groups in the Northern mountainous region and found that there are very few. Actually, there are four: Plan, Oxfam, UNICEF and out of curriculum activities of USS. The UNICEF project is mother tongue-based bilingual education, which focuses primarily on technical issues with pre-school and primary school children as the target group. We see UNICEF is less appropriate compared to Plan and Oxfam progrmames so our final selection is Plan, Oxfam and USS. Programme details are presented in the table below.

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30 http://baolaocai.vn/36-0-19708/chuyen-giam-ngheo-o-si-ma-cai.aspx

Overview of the selected programme details

Programme name	Communication approach	Period of implementation	Implementing agency	Geographic coverage/site	Key issues/sector within child marriage/ girls ed	Objectives	Implementation strategy and activities	Target group	Results
PLAN Because I am a girl	- Non-formal education - Social media - Hybrid approaches	2011-2015	Plan	Meo Vac & Yen Minh district of Ha Giang province	Child marriage	To promote the comprehensive development of ethnic minority girls (EMG)	- EMG are protected from child marriage - Ethnic minority girls are supported to receive better quality ECCD and primary education - Ethnic minority girls, young women and men assess safe maternal health services and nutrition care	EMG and their parents Officers & collaborators	- Adolescent EMG groups been established in all communes of the project - Girls were trained for knowledge and skills to protect themselves - Social media events were held at commune centre on child rights & child protection -Training for officers & collaborators about child rights and risks of early marriage
Upper secondary school Out of curriculum activities on reproductive health	Non-formal education approaches (through contests, dramas, clubs…)	Periodically since 2010	Youth Union of the School	Meo Vac district - school based	Reproductive health (child marriage is integrated into the topic)	To increase awareness of EMG & boys by dissemination information re reproductive health and child marriage	- Organising contest/drama on RH & HIV /AIDS, drug use - Establishing club 'You and me' - Information provision to all students in the Monday morning gathering session	EM students	- EM students are aware of issues such as reproductive health, HIV/AIDS… - Safe space for EM students to express their concern and discuss among themselves - EM students know about legal

Oxfam Promoting social accountability in education sector in Vietnam	- Community dialogue -Training/ capacity building - Non-formal education approaches (through contests, clubs…)	2011-2014	Oxfam and Education Department of Lao Cai	Simacai and Sapa district of Lao Cai province	Child rights	To have more children, especially girls and children from ethnic minorities to exercise their right to access to educational activities, and to promote the participation of children in the educational program	-Communication festivals on children's rights; - Drawing contest 'My dream'; - Mail Box and the forum 'What I want to say'; - 'Youth Journalist' club.	- Pupils of primary and LSS - Pupils' parents - Teachers, education managers & collaborators	marriage age and aware of risks of child marriage - The positive change is that girls have realized their rights and expressed the belief that they should continue education. - Pupils are more confident and active in school affairs for example writing letters saying their wish to the mailing box and realised that teachers have taken into account their messages. At home, they are started the negotiating with parents on doing housework.

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Cover photo: After school at a lower secondary school in Can Chu Phin Commune, Meo Vac District, Ha Giang, Viet Nam © Dao Hong Le, 2014

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