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A Voice for the Future: How women are protecting Lao PDR‘ natural heritage

For Mone Noramonthy, life has always revolved around the forest. In her home village of Kayou, close to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hin Nam No National Park, forests sustain livelihoods by providing food, water and income. As a mother and farmer, Mone knows that protecting the forest and its biodiversity means protecting her community's future.

Traditionally, however, decisions about the forest and its protection were largely made by men. Consultations with local communities during the nomination of Hin Nam No National Park as a UNESCO World Heritage Site showed that women rarely had a voice in conservation planning and decision-making. In response, GIZ, together with the Lao Women's Union, the National University of Laos, local authorities and the National Park management, launched a 'Women in Conservation' approach. Women – particularly from ethnic communities – received training on biodiversity conservation, gender equality and protected area management. At the same time, men also took part in biodiversity and gender training. Husbands and village leaders became important allies, encouraging women to attend training sessions and take on new responsibilities. Looking back, Mone reflects on how attitudes have changed: "Nowadays, the participation of women and men is mostly equal. Men do hard work while women do lighter tasks where it is appropriate."

Inspired by her lifelong connection to the forest, Mone stepped forward to play a more active role in protecting her community's natural heritage. She became a respected women's group representative, mobilising other women, gathering information and ensuring that the voices of ethnic women were heard throughout the process. As the initiative expanded across five villages, the Lao Women's Union travelled for hours by motorbike across overflowing rivers and muddy roads to reach even the most remote communities. Together with women like Mone, they mapped the natural resources the communities rely on most and developed five Community Action Plans that reflected local priorities and complemented the management of Hin Nam No National Park. Mone represented the women of her village in meetings, helping turn local knowledge into practical conservation action. Reflecting on her role, she says simply: "I am proud to take part in the forest conservation initiative."

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From Ideas to Impact

Today, the Community Action Plans continue to guide the work of the village women's groups, who meet regularly to review progress, monitor their conservation activities and agree on next steps. Every quarter, the women's groups share their progress with the district Lao Women's Union, which brings their priorities and experiences into the co-management meetings of Hin Nam No National Park. There, the women's priorities and recommendations are discussed alongside those of village authorities, park management and district and provincial government agencies, ensuring that local voices continue to shape the management of the protected area. Women who once felt excluded now lead discussions, confidently represent their villages and see their ideas reflected in conservation decisions. Communities have become more collaborative, with women and men working side by side to protect the natural resources.

Alongside these long-term changes, the initiative also delivered tangible results across the pilot villages. In total, 424 people participated in biodiversity conservation and gender equality training, including 136 women. Women's groups began monitoring natural resources, seasonal calendars helped communities harvest fish, frogs, crabs and bamboo more sustainably, while a children's storybook and a radio programme promoted biodiversity conservation and gender equality by sharing local knowledge. Building on these results, the approach expanding to 17 additional villages around Hin Nam No National Park.

From One Village to Global Action

Mone's story is one example of how global biodiversity commitments can be translated into action on the ground. Projects such as *Strengthening National Implementation of Global Biodiversity Targets*, implemented by GIZ on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), support communities like Mone's in turning these commitments into reality. In Lao PDR, this has enabled women and ethnic communities to influence national biodiversity action for the first time by developing Community Action Plans to protect their natural resources and ensure their sustainable use.

The project extends beyond Lao PDR, supporting biodiversity action in Colombia, Peru, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Namibia, Madagascar and Indonesia. Across these eight partner countries, more than 3,000 people from Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and youth groups have directly contributed to conservation efforts that affect their lands and livelihoods. By bringing these groups together with governments, the project helps ensure that biodiversity action reflects the knowledge and priorities of those whose lives depend most on nature.
As a result, six of the eight partner countries have already submitted stronger, more inclusive biodiversity action plans to the United Nations – shaped by the people whose lives depend on them and backed by real commitments on the ground. Among them is Mone, whose commitment to protecting the forest is driven by a simple hope: that her children and the generations that follow will continue to benefit from the nature that has sustained her community for generations.

Links
Brochure on Women in Boulapha
Lao PDR Storybook Hin Nam No Conservation

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