POWER MAPPING IN THE COFFEE AND TEA SECTORS (A.2.1.2)

1. Introduction

The "Reducing Vulnerability in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: Advancing Social Protection and Labour Rights and Entitlements in the Coffee and Tea Sectors" (SOLAR) Project – a European Union-financed initiative implemented by the ILO and Oxfam in Laos – is working to improve the working conditions and overall well-being of coffee and tea workers in the Bolaven Plateau region. Specifically, the project aims to: (1) extend and improve social protection and occupational safety and health (OSH) delivery systems and services at the district level in the coffee and tea sectors, particularly for informal workers and women; and (2) to have workers in the coffee and tea sectors, particularly informal workers and women, in three contiguous districts of the Bolaven Plateau organized and empowered to promote and protect their labour rights.

One of the strategic interventions undertaken as part of the SOLAR Project was a power mapping to help identify and explore the multiple power dimensions of stakeholders, institutions and households, as well as the social norms that contribute to gender inequality. Oxfam in Laos and the local CSO Maeying Huamjai Phattana (MHP), with support from the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU), conducted this power mapping exercise in April 2023. The objective was to better calibrate the activities of the SOLAR Project by consulting with stakeholders to determine which institutions and organizations needed to be targeted based on their power to influence the extension of social protection to coffee and tea farmers, most of whom are informally employed. This brief provides an overview of the results of the power mapping exercise.

2. Why power mapping?

"Power" refers to a social structure that materializes in the interaction of people, either individually or as groups. In a development context, "power" is often referred to in relation to the concept of "empowerment". For instance, in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the term "empowerment" is used in relation to promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of women and girls (Esquivel 2016). Kabeer (1999) defined empowerment as a process that involves the provision of resources, opportunities and support to enable individuals or groups to expand their ability to make choices for their lives amid contexts in which such ability may be restricted or denied.

Unequal power relations can be seen in many forms in societies around the world, be it unfair investments that disproportionately benefit wealthier groups, social norms that cause women to be burdened with unpaid work in the household, or marginalized workers having less negotiating power to protect their rights and interests, among others. It is critical for programme actors – including local partners, workers' organizations and individual workers – to have an understanding of the power dynamics relevant to the project in order to ensure better engagement and to more successfully influence changes in policy and in practice.

With this in mind, the SOLAR Project conducted a power mapping intervention that was designed to help target groups understand the relevant power dynamics, identify and explore the multiple power dimensions inherent in these dynamics, and identify the **supporters, neutral parties and blockers** that can affect marginalized workers' – especially women workers' – access to social protection and labour rights. The power mapping intervention also sought to better understand the different factors that interact to reinforce power relations in the project's target areas. Having a complete understanding of power relations in the project area helps in identifying appropriate strategies, alliances and entry points for the coffee and tea sectors.

3. Methodology

Oxfam in Laos and MHP, with support from the LFTU, conducted a power mapping workshop in Champassak Province on 24–25 April 2023. The workshop involved the participants from project implementing partners at the local level, including provincial- and district-level trade union officials, provincial- and district-level Labour and Social Welfare officials, provincial- and district-level Social Security officials, and representatives from tea and coffee farmer groups and cooperatives.

To empower the SOLAR Project's target groups and stakeholders though an improved understanding of the concept of power and how useful and relevant such an understanding is to achieving the project goals, Oxfam and MHP utilized simplified power mapping tools that combined a conceptual overview of the latest insights on the nature of power with the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology. The GALS approach generally avoids direct lectures on topics in favour of spurring learning and engagement through collaborative approaches based around participants creating drawings as a group.

One of the tools adapted from the GALS methodology in the power mapping workshop was the creation of a strategic tree. This is a diagram that uses a tree-branch-like structures to help participants identify the main challenges faced by coffee farmers and to explore possible solutions to address these challenges. In addition, the issues identified during brainstorming sessions using the strategic tree were utilized to explore who the actors causing the challenges are, how to obtain authority to address these issues, and who are impacted by the identified issues.

An additional tool that was used for capturing the key actors influencing the challenges faced by coffee and tea farmers was the agent mapping tool. This tool allowed participants to identify power agents in their specific contexts and to categorize the levels of authorization that these agents possess that can either influence changes, facilitate progress and ease procedures, or alternatively hinder processes and even terminate efforts being made in the project area.

These power analysis tools were used to examine the power dynamics that could be harnessed to maximize access to social protection among women in the coffee and tea sectors, and to

identify power agents that hold authorization at all levels, from the grassroots level to the policy level, while analysing how power and power holders can influence opportunities for women to access social protection.

4. Overview of power, as presented at the power mapping workshop

The power mapping workshop started by providing participants with an understanding of the concept of "power" to help them develop a better grasp of power dynamics and power relations before engaging in participatory group work and discussions. The sections below present a brief overview of the knowledge provided during the initial sessions of the workshop.

4.1. Power dynamics

Concepts around power have emerged in development discourse and have implications among the actors involved in the development space. The word "power" itself can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources that is exercised by different sections of society (Stuart 2019). The exercise of the power can be differentiated as follows:

Power over: This concept is typically built on force, coercion, domination and control (Bennett 2019; Stuart 2019). It refers to the ability to control or influence, which can manifest in many forms including political and economic power and social influence. The power over, according to Haugaard (2020), is considered as an undesirable form of power because it leads to the lack of collaboration, trust erosion, resistance, rebellion, dehumanization, short-term effectiveness, negative outcomes and ethical concerns.

Power to: The concept of this power type represents dependent and interchangeable aspects of positive relationships, such as friendship, love and trust (Chen and Mak 2020). Power to can be described as achieving goals through taking co-responsibility and helping each other to set goals that are acknowledged by both parties (Pansardi and Bindi 2021).

Figure 1. Types of power
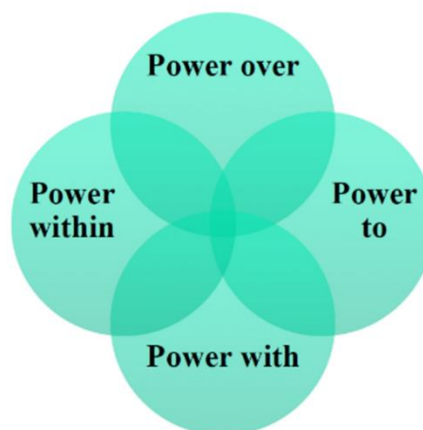
Power with: This type of power can be defined as shared capability that contributes to a collaboration and relationship built on respect, mutual support, shared power, solidarity, collaborative decision-making, influence and empowerment (Mathie, Cameron, and Gibson 2017). It is a coactive form of power emerging from the collaboration within a group that is united and moving to achieve a common end (Bratteteig and Wagner 2016; Parnsadi 2011).

Power within: This concept of power is perceived as a positive form that empowers groups/individuals to form more equitable relationships (Whalley and Vendrzyk 2020). The concept of power within has been derived from feminist theory and development studies to explore the diverse aspects of power in societies (Parnsadi 2011). This includes the development of processes aimed at empowering disadvantaged and marginalized groups, including women and girls, wherein the "power within" perspective was applied to criticize the "power over" aspects that characterized the patriarchal and illegitimate exercise of power found in many societies (Townsend et al. 1999).

4.2. Gender analysis of power

In addition to helping participants better define power and how to recognize it in its multiple forms, the workshop presented a gender analysis of the power framework that has been widely used in gender discourse aimed at fostering changes in all aspects that impact women's lives. The framework drew on guidelines for implementing changes from the individual level to the systemic level, as well as along a continuum of informal and formal practices. Fostering formal change at the individual level can bring about access to resources for women, including health, educational and financial services, as well as other tangible economic gains. While at the systemic level, formal changes might be seen in the rules and policies determining who is eligible for such access to resources.

Figure 2. Gender analysis of power
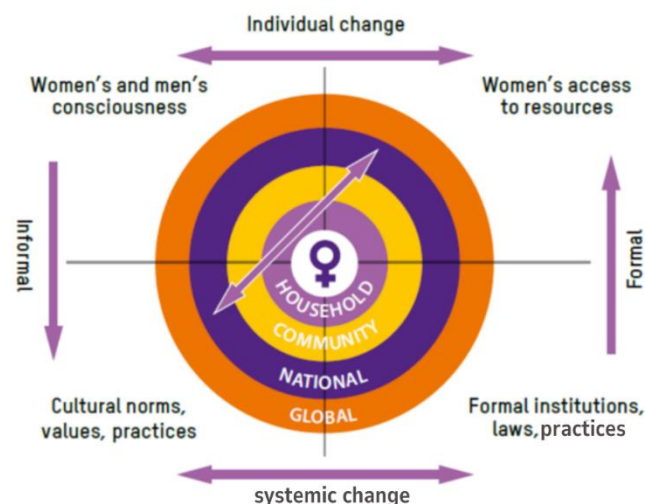
However, formal changes are not enough on their own, as positive changes that bring about real improvement in gender equality are required in an informal, everyday capacity as well. At the individual level such informal changes might affect the consciousness, awareness, capabilities and leadership abilities of individual people, shifting their personal perspectives towards a more gender equal headspace. Change of this kind at the systemic level is more challenging, as it involves altering deep-seated social norms and values across entire communities and populations. Such changes are essential to removing discriminatory barriers that can disempower women and deny them their rights and voice.

Group exercises

Identifying challenges:

After the concepts of power were introduced, participants brainstormed the challenges faced by coffee and tea farmers. Deploying the strategic tree tool, the workshop participants were split into groups based on their geographical, organizational and production line similarities, such as tea and coffee production groups and cooperatives, and local government organizations. Each group was assigned the task of identifying the issues they face on the strategic tree (see example at the right). With the issues identified, the participants then created drawings to identify power agents and their correlation to their organization(s).

Strategic Tree Model

One of the groups doing this exercise comprised mainly staff from the Association to Support the Development of Peasant Societies (ASDSP), Huamjai Asasamak Association/ Phanthin Social Enterprise (HJA/PTSE), and Maeying Huamjai Phatthana Association (MHP). Another group comprised government officials from the provincial Federations of Trade Unions in the three provinces and the provincial Social Security Offices.

By the end of the session, each group was found to have drawn similar figures that included the identification of power holders that each organization has partnered with on a financial, decision-

making and/or relationship basis. Some examples can be found in the figure to the right, which presents the drawings produced by MHP and ASDSP identifying some of the power agents surrounding and within their operating spheres. The internal power agents of both organizations can be identified as executive officers and managers who have the power to make the decisions within each organization, though they may not have the right to interfere with programme operations. It can also be seen that the external power agents – which include provincial and district government authorities – were seen to play important roles in the organizations' programme operations. However, it is interesting to note that within this sphere, communities and the technical officers of the organizations were considered to be powerless agents who have less impact on decision-making and agreements made on the issues identified.

The results of the drawing created by the government official group demonstrated another dimension of the exercising of power that involves both consensus and conflict among the power holders. The discussion that followed the creation of their drawing showed that – like with the example of MHP and ASDSP above – most power holders in their sphere of operations are selected internal power holders with degrees of authorization. However, within the organizational structure, there was also a power hierarchy in which even high-level committee members needed authorization from others to make certain decisions.

Following the analysis of the power agents that each group identified, the next session aimed to help participants in mapping out the most influential agents in relation to their operations. The session involved all of the participants, regardless of their organizational setting, with the aim of pinpointing those power holders who have influence on the ability of informal workers in the coffee and tea sectors to access social protection. Ultimately, the following list of power holders was produced: Ministry of Health, National Assembly, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW), Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU), Lao Women's Union, civil society organizations, District Agriculture and Forestry Offices, Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Offices, Champasack coffee cooperatives, Lao Social Security Organization (LSSO), Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI), Provincial People's Assemblies, and the ILO.

The power mapping tool was then used to illustrate whether these relevant stakeholders play the role of a supporter, a neutral actor or a blocker based on their different capacities to influence the promotion of access to social protection among tea and coffee farmers. To determine this, a power mapping tool chart was presented to the participants in which the vertical axis indicated level of influence (from least powerful to most powerful) and the horizontal axis indicated the continuum of support for the objective of the project (ranging from opposition to strong support). The various power holders were discussed by the participants and were placed on the chart based on their level of power and degree of support.

Based on the participants' responses, it was determined that government agencies at the central level have the most power and influence over access to social protection among coffee and tea farmers. The National Assembly and the MOLSW were the top-ranked institutions in regard to perceived power, which marked then as the principle entities whose influence should be taken into account when engaging in policy advocacy and influencing campaigns related to labour rights and social protection. The LFTU, LSSO and LNCCI were all considered to be institutions with rather limited amounts of power to influence social protection coverage among coffee and tea farmers. The exercise also showed that stakeholders like Agriculture Departments, media, and district and provincial authorities are also critical to engage with and mobilize support. The coffee and tea producer groups, cooperatives, and civil society organizations were considered as having a low level of power, but they were rated as having a high degree of support for the expansion of social protection and a high degree of interest to be engaged in ambitious projects and in developing their collective powers to ensure that coffee and tea farmers' rights are protected.

The discussion also revealed that the broad communities exert influence over coffee and tea farmers when it comes to registering for the NSSF. This is mainly because of lack of proper information from the government and local authorities to the farmers. In addition, local people had unpleasant experiences when they had signed up for private life insurance schemes which disappeared after some time without providing any notice or refund. They also had poor experience with local government funds, which stopped providing benefits after a while, possibly as the funding projects came to an end and proper information was not communicated to the farmers. The exercise found that farmers often rely on these experiences of other people in the communities, especially in the absence of clear and consistent information from LSSO and the government, and therefore, end up being skeptical of the NSSF information campaigns.

Private sector actors, including labour brokers, have little willingness to support and contribute to promoting access to social protection among marginalized workers, especially when it comes to making contributions to the LSSO, providing OSH protection equipment and holding information sessions. The discussion during the session revealed that one of the main reasons why the private sector was not supportive of social security membership was their concerns about incurring costs in the form of employers' contributions to the National Social Security Fund. Without proper understanding and awareness of the social security benefits and the absence of trade union representatives within companies, many large corporates with large numbers of employees perceive that investing in social security would reduce their revenue. Another reason is that some companies provide welfare packages from private companies, as they perceive these to be more effective, and to do wish to provide double benefits. The baseline survey found that, despite advocacy efforts by the local trade unions and other authorities, Vietnamese investors and traders who invested in coffee and passion fruit farms in Paksong District were reluctant to contribute to the National Social Security Fund because they felt that they conduct their business

on an occasional basis with temporary and irregular workers, and have high investment in production lines.

Figure 3. Power mapping in relation to informal workers in the coffee and tea sectors accessing social protection
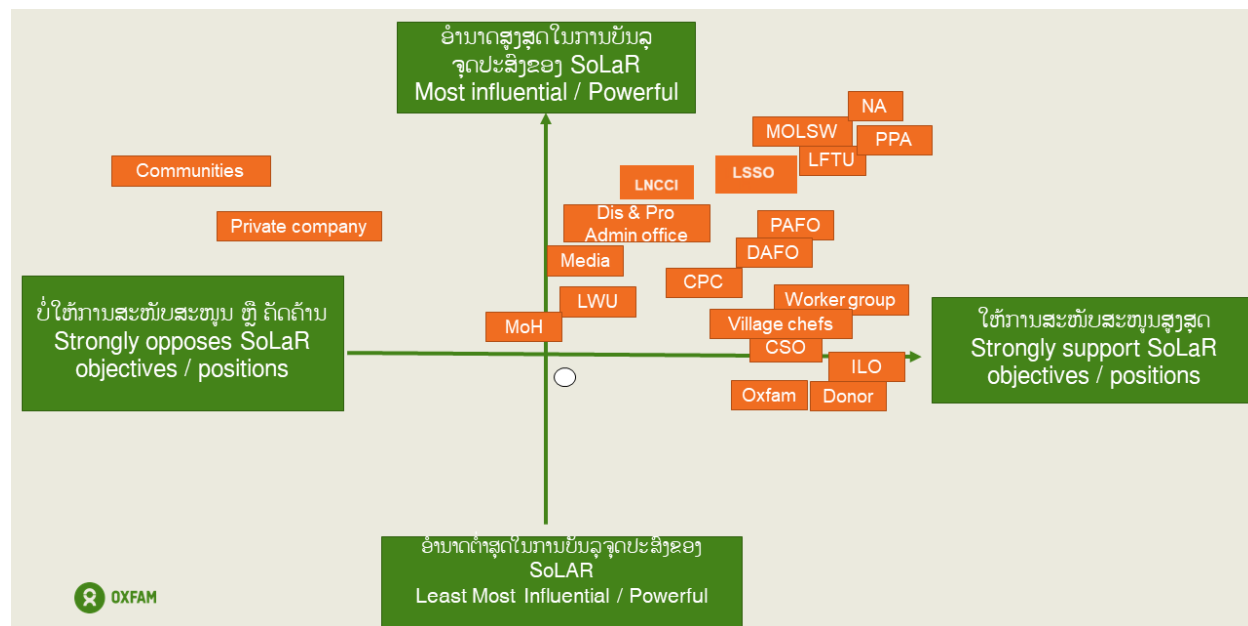
CPC = Bolaven Plateau Coffee Producers Cooperative; CSO = civil society organizations; DAFO = District Agriculture and Forestry Office; Dis & Pro Admin Office = District and Provincial Administration Offices; LNCCI = Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry; LFTU = Lao Federation of Trade Unions; LWU = Lao Women's Union; MoH = Ministry of Health; MOLSW = Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare; NA = National Assembly; PAFO = Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office; PPA = Provincial People's Assembly; LSSO = Lao Social Security Office. Source: Power Mapping Workshop.

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