



GREAT

GREAT COVID-19 UPDATE

June 2020

Introduction

The global **COVID-19** pandemic has presented some serious challenges for partners that the **GREAT Program** is working with, including government, business, and civil society. GREAT's target sectors, tourism and higher-end agricultural products have been particularly hard hit, for example the



Tea sector

has declined by

19%

in value to

\$37.000.000

compared to the same period last year.

Importantly, the **COVID-19** pandemic does not change GREAT's overarching Program objective to improve the socio-economic status of women living in north-west Vietnam through increased participation and incomes from the agriculture and tourism markets. However, GREAT is working to assess and understand the specific impacts and risks of COVID-19 on each partner and their target beneficiaries, (ethnic minority women in Son La and Lao Cai provinces). As in the case with previous crises, it is often marginalised communities that are the most vulnerable due to a lack of formal employment, lower digital connectivity resulting in a lack of access to information and services, and insufficient cash reserves. There is also a potential for increased gender-based violence due to social distancing restrictions and economic stress.

This update provides a summary of the impact on COVID-19 on GREAT partners and beneficiaries, and what the Program is doing to respond.



COVID-19

Impact



Impact on Partners

GREAT has supported partners to re-prioritise their activities to ensure business and project continuity and has worked with them to respond to the specific challenges that COVID-19 presents including communications on COVID-19 prevention in ethnic minority languages; targeted information to support people at risk of gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19; and adapting business operations to create new income opportunities for ethnic minority women.

The recent easing of restrictions has considerably improved business outlook, however, recovery will take time with international trade still severely impacted and a global recession almost inevitable. Restrictions may also be re-instated if there are further outbreaks of COVID-19 in the country. A survey of GREAT partners in April 2020 revealed that:



58% of partners believe their revenue will decline and **38%** believe their profit will decline due to COVID-19



31% of partners believe they will have to reduce staff



23% of partners forecast they will have to reduce or stop exports



46% of partners intend to maintain the same or increased level of purchases from farmers demonstrating a strong commitment to the project

Partners are seeking support with financing, market development and help to connect to government support programs



Impact on Beneficiaries

GREAT beneficiaries that are being tracked as part of a longitudinal study have been contacted to assess the impact of COVID-19. While not a representative sample, the qualitative information does provide important insights with some beneficiaries reporting a reduction of income due to lower prices being offered for agricultural products, or being forced to sell products via local traders at a lower price due to travel restrictions.

While most farming activities continued during the lockdown, there has been some impact. "As gatherings are prohibited, tea harvesting is being undertaken by smaller groups which adversely affects productivity". In GREAT target districts, it is common to migrate for work to China or elsewhere in Vietnam - with COVID-19 travel restrictions in place, these opportunities have been severely limited. Understandably, tourism has been badly affected across Son La and Lao Cai. One beneficiary reported having no income from tourism and was not able to travel for work and therefore has reverted to farming for an income. Other issues that were reported were the impact of social isolation, higher food prices and a reluctance to seek medical help due to the fear of COVID-19.





GREAT COVID-19 Response and Recovery Initiative

GREAT is responding to the impact of COVID-19 in Son La and Lao Cai through the establishment of a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund which will provide support at the sector and partner level to enable businesses to rebound quickly and help build resilience of ethnic minority women to future shocks. The Fund will include the following types of initiatives:



Partner Business Continuity:

Support partners to adapt to the impact of COVID-19, sustain business operations and build resilience. This can include diversifying markets, preparing for the safe resumption of trade for tourism enterprises, upskilling business owners, implementing new business models, and connecting businesses to government programs and sources of finance.



Tourism and Agricultural Sector Support:

Support towards sector-wide crisis management, and recovery plans in Son La and Lao Cai, including creating demand and promoting innovations.



Access to Finance:

The impact of COVID-19 highlights the need to increase financial literacy for ethnic minority women and to encourage household savings as a buffer to get through difficult times. The move towards cashless payments and e-government services is also likely to disadvantage ethnic minority women if they do not have exposure or understanding of emerging technologies. GREAT will work with organisations that have systemic solutions for promoting suitable savings products, basic financial literacy training/tools and digital finance training.



Closing the digital literacy gap for ethnic minority women:

The level of digital literacy is an important factor impacting the ability of ethnic minority women to access market information and services. This tends to be even more challenging for those who are not literate in Kinh and the impact of COVID-19 has further highlighted the divide. GREAT will work with suitable partners to implement practical, systemic solutions that will help improve the digital literacy of ethnic minority women and also address language challenges.



Gender-Based Violence (GBV):

Experience from Wuhan and around the world has demonstrated that the risk and incidences of GBV are likely to increase, and the ability for women to access support services is more difficult during social isolation. This is particularly acute for ethnic minority women. There is also evidence from within Vietnam that addressing women's livelihoods can also exacerbate GBV if gender equality is not addressed with both men and women. The GREAT program will partner with the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA) to increase the awareness of GBV and available support services.