GENDER-RESPONSIVE EQUITABLE AGRICULTURE AND TOURISM (GREAT): WORKING WITH OPD FOR MUTUAL LEARNING AND BENEFIT

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> ***"This partnership shows people with disabilities are not just a program beneficiary and that OPD roles can go beyond sharing their lived experience to providing tailored sector specific technical inclusion advice."***
>
> DP Hanoi

OVERVIEW

The Gender-Responsive Equitable Agriculture and Tourism (GREAT) Program promotes women's economic empowerment through market systems development (MSD) in the ethnically diverse provinces of Son La and Lao Cai in north-west Vietnam. Implemented by Cowater International, the program aims to improve the socio-economic status of women living in north-west Vietnam through increased participation in the agriculture and tourism sectors.

Currently in its second phase (2023–2028), GREAT has taken significant steps to partner with Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) to embed inclusive practices across the investment and invest in OPD capacity strengthening.

This case study outlines a mutual capacity building approach between GREAT and their OPD partner DP Hanoi. DP Hanoi is a cross-disability OPD with approximately 17,500 members across northern Vietnam.



The GREAT team and DPH team assessing inclusive tourism at a homestay in Son La

KEY CHALLENGES

- During its first phase, GREAT did not have a disability inclusion strategy, resulting in **women with disabilities reporting little engagement or benefit from business opportunities** created by the investment. Internal management reviews revealed a need to strengthen performance in disability equity and rights. GREAT sought DP Hanoi's expertise to specifically address the low engagement with women with disabilities.

- **GREAT faced challenges to resource OPD capability building** due to the absence of a dedicated disability inclusion budget and relevant MEL indicators within the investment. Although OPD strengthening activities align with the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, demonstrating linkages with GREAT's existing end-of-program outcomes was not straightforward, revealing a disconnect between policy and programming.

- **While OPD partnership was new for GREAT, they recognised that common consultancy arrangements would not support the dual aim of increasing disability inclusion in the program as well as increasing capability of the OPD.** For example, they saw a need to support OPDs to tailor their expertise to the investment's specific needs—particularly in market systems development initiatives outside traditional social development sectors. Without tailored support, OPD contributions risked being dismissed as "not fit for purpose," reducing their influence and missing opportunities to foster ongoing dialogue and mutual learning.

KEY ENABLERS OF MUTUAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

1. Recognition of the unique position, capabilities and risks held by OPDs

DP Hanoi was selected as a partner because of their strong reputation and respect within the disability community, and their expressed interest in growing their skills in technical consultancy.

GREAT not only recognized the value of including OPDs, but they also demonstrated a realistic understanding of common contextual challenges OPDs face. They intentionally adopted an approach that started from the OPD's current capacity and circumstances and considered risk or unintended harm to volunteer networks.

> ***"Investments need to take an expanded view of movement strengthening - it's two parties coming together, looking to see where we each bring value, with the aim of mutual benefit. We are impressed with DP Hanoi, their capacity and their ability to voice their need."***
>
> GREAT

2. Mutually identifying gaps for program and OPD partner

From the outset, GREAT facilitated partnership discussions with DP Hanoi to include dual objectives of capacity strengthening of the OPD as well as improving investment outcomes. Learning areas for the OPD were identified with the aim to increase their contextual and technical skill in the investment focus area. Building flexibility into this agenda through scheduling multi-session support removed the expectation that OPDs need to come into partnerships fully resourced and prepared to provide technical advice across any investment.

> *"While DP Hanoi knew disability well, sector shifts to broader GEDSI programming took more explaining, as did the DFAT process of program design and reporting"*
>
> Cowater regional trainer

> *"We learnt a lot from GREAT. When we don't know a specialist development area, they give us opportunity to learn more, and we can invite our members to join. For example, Market System Development. This training helps us bring disability our perspective in that field lens more easily."*
>
> DP Hanoi

3. Integrating capability building and feedback throughout the partnership

GREAT supported the capability building of the OPD alongside their advisory and awareness raising initiatives with GREAT partners, helped in tailoring their disability inclusion advice for partners. Joint implementation also gave opportunity for practical modelling and teaching to partner organisations and increased understanding of OPD expertise.

> *"We noticed that our staff with disabilities could model respectful and positive interactions with people with disabilities. This helped both GREAT and other partners to see successful ways to respond to people with disabilities and the strength in community work when you have people with disabilities involved in the staff team"*
>
> DP Hanoi

The joint work was identified as an important opportunity for two-way feedback and learning. However, resourcing was a constraint on the time available to follow up opportunities for coaching and mentoring.

> *"They [DP Hanoi] did show their effort to understand and ask us if their input is fitting with the program. I see their effort. We used these activities as learning as we know this is more impactful than separate training, although it's hard to allocate time to these opportunities"*
>
> GREAT

4. Adopting a flexible approach to tailoring training deepened relationships and mutual learning

Allowing the OPD to select who was involved in specific sessions of capability development, meant they could maximise impact across their staff, governing board and volunteer network. Mutual respect and a willingness to allocate time for applying learning to the OPD's current challenges and opportunities demonstrated tangible support for the OPD leadership and built trust with the Cowater trainer. Consistent staff trainers across the multi-session engagement supported this relationship building.

> ***"We invited different levels of management to review how the content (DFAT GEDSI policies) integrated with their own vision and mission, helping them embed in practice, what was on paper. These interactions were heading towards coaching"***
>
> Cowater regional trainer

The tailored sessions for the OPD were designed with a clear aim for applied learning. For example, the session on gender was first delivered online to management, then repeated in-person for staff and volunteers, co-facilitated by GREAT local GEDSI staff. This arrangement helped overcome earlier language and cultural barriers and provide deeper application.

> ***"My aim was to prepare them for when they are in a position of providing technical expertise. To help them be well prepared, professional so that they look good and are taken seriously as providers of high quality and relevant advice; a good asset for GREAT, good for DP Hanoi."***
>
> Cowater regional trainer

Both GREAT and DP Hanoi expressed high appreciation for the planning calls with OPD management that occurred in between the scheduled sessions. Although not originally recognised as learning opportunities, they were identified as strategic, and essential to build in and resource within future mutual capability building partnerships.

5. Articulating and implementing in alignment with IDEARS

A key driver for this initiative was the program looking for an alternative to transactional exchanges between programs and OPDs. Key staff within GREAT saw opportunity for strengthening disability equity and rights at the investment level, through engagement with OPDs which had the potential to strengthen their capability more broadly. GREAT's positioning of OPDs as both technical leaders (in disability rights, equity and inclusion) and active learners (in sector specific areas), provided opportunity to increase disability awareness and OPD networking opportunities within wider private and public partners.

6. Leveraging flexible funding opportunities to support the capacity building

Although the original investment design and mechanisms provided limited entry points for formal OPD engagement, GREAT was able to progress disability inclusion measures in other ways. As a joint vision on the OPD-GREAT partnership was developed, GREAT GEDSI advisors advocated to utilise the unallocated technical assistance fund to support OPD capability building initiatives. The Cowater regional GEDSI trainer was also able to utilise the inbuilt management fee to cover her time in supporting OPD capability. While these creative options were essential to the success, it is recommended that mutual capacity building activities are built into program budgets from the outset to ensure they are not displaced by competing priorities

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE MUTUAL LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

1. Strengthening the capability and sector specific knowledge of OPD increased the specificity of their advice and development of quality tailored resources

> ***"When we know about MSD we can collaborate with GREAT to work with companies and implementing partners. For example, tourism industry partners considered it 'too hard' for a person with disability to work in a hotel reception position This led to us to give guidance to employers about how to work with people with disability and create an inclusive environment"***
>
> DP Hanoi

This has led to increased advisory opportunities for DP Hanoi and developed their approach to building in technical capacity building opportunities within other advisory consultancy opportunities.

> ***"Our experience with GREAT has helped us know what to ask for when organisations come to ask us to be disability advisorsand technical support. Now we can say 'yes, we can do this, but you need to train us in the technical area first so we can provide the best advice'"***
>
> DP Hanoi

> ***"They [DP Hanoi] did show their effort to understand and ask us if their input is fitting with the program. I see their effort. We used these activities as learning as we know this is more impactful than separate training, although it's hard to allocate time to these opportunities"***
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> GREAT

2. Increased inclusion of women with disabilities within GREAT and skills within implementing partners

The number of persons with disabilities participating is growing and practices in markets is slowly changing across GREAT's projects, particularly in Women's Entrepreneurship and Leadership (WEL), Digital Transformation and the Agriculture and Tourism portfolios. For example, following the first year of implementation, the Digital Transformation project partners noted active participation from three people with disability and recognised significant market potential for people with disability within digital industries. Following GREAT's market system approach for market actors to "adopt-adapt-expand-respond", partners developed a suite of tailored interventions supporting people with disability to develop career pathways in the digital economy. Business coaching service providers for women entrepreneurs under WEL have also adjusted outreach and coaching practices to be inclusive and responsive to the needs of women entrepreneurs with disability, and training hospitality services trainers under the tourism portfolio has significantly bolstered facilitation and pedagogy approaches to better enable active participation of people with disability.



Following DPH's training on disability awareness to GREAT program staff and implementing partners, disability inclusive measures were practically adapted into programming to boost EMW with disability leadership and accessibility.

Here, Ms. Tran Thi Mai Anh, a women entrepreneur from the Women's Entrepreneur and Leadership project is making a speech during a field trip. In the audience is her mother accompanying her and her cooperative leaders. In addition to improving physical infrastructure, GREAT recognises the critical role families of PwD play in market accessibility including them throughout the PwD's training journey, as well as working with market partners awareness of disability.

In addition to the increased participation of women with disability, the capability building approach has amplified the visibility and voice of OPDs, serving as an indirect advocacy mechanism within the Vietnam context. Furthermore, GREAT reported facilitating OPD participation in sector-specific technical training benefits all participants, as OPD members bring a valuable disability perspective that enriches learning and promotes the integration of disability inclusion across the training content.

KEY LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review OPD contracting processes and documents to reflect partnership flexibility and capability building approach. Embed and resource coordination, mentoring and feedback mechanisms, reasonable accommodation, targeted capability building series and access to specific technical training with relation to the focus of the investment. Augment the iterative approach of codesigning by using tasking notes for agreed deliverables.

2. Embed disability specific budgeting within investments to ensure all aspects of OPD partnership capability are resourced.

3. Work with OPD to identify participants for capacity development activities, with the aim of supporting broader impact across the organisation.

4. Prioritise and advocate for OPDs within technical capability building opportunities for investment partners

5. Ensure partner capacity training activities incorporate accessibility considerations from the outset.

6. Develop internal policies and practice prioritising OPD strengthening within investments.

ANNEX 1 - SUMMARY OF MUTUAL CAPACITY BUILDING

GREAT and DP Hanoi mutual capacity-building activities were incorporated amongst joint engagement in partner initiatives to improve outcomes for women with disabilities in GREAT's agriculture and tourism markets. By prioritising a mix of tailored and technical partner training, the OPD and GREAT grew a shared understanding of the inclusive technical assistance needed for public and private stakeholders to enhance opportunities for women with disabilities in these markets.

Figure 1. Detail of capacity building activities between GREAT and DP Hanoi

