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PROGRAM UPDATE

USAID LEAF Initiative Helps Develop Leaders for Gender Equality



Sunitha Bishan discusses key elements of training design to develop a training plan on gender equality in climate change.

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Sisomphet Souvanthisith
Lao National Commission for Advancement of Women

Since November 2013, the United States Agency for International Development Lowering Emissions in Asia's Forests (USAID LEAF) program has been supporting a core group of 24 gender champions from 21 institutions in six Asia-Pacific countries through its flagship activity, *Asia-Pacific Leadership Initiative on Gender and Climate Change*.

At the heart of the initiative lies the principle of equality: that everyone regardless of gender is entitled to the same rights and opportunities. To promote this, the first in a series of workshops using a gender lens explored self-awareness, leadership and organizational analysis, encouraging the gender champions to discuss the effects of gender inequality in their lives, relationships and the institutions to which they belong. Chinneth Cheng, a gender champion who works at the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Cambodia, spoke of her personal and organizational transformation since she joined the initiative. "I changed a lot. I put myself in others' shoes and can see the bigger picture. There is more positivity in my life," she says. At the moment, Chinneth is developing a new strategy for her organization and contributing to the Gender and Climate Change Action Plan for Cambodia. She is also mobilizing external funding for gender activities and even adding a gender subject to the national high school curriculum.

The second and third workshops in the series provided practical skills for gender-integrated planning, safeguards and strengthened champions' negotiation skills to address gender issues into climate change and REDD+ work. When asked how these trainings influenced her, Sisomphet Souvanthisith, of the Lao National Commission for Advancement of Women in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, responded, "I integrated gender principles into forest management activities. We encouraged women to participate by forming women's groups and building their capacity. The groups identified the problems that are relevant to them and then find the solutions."

Sisomphet spoke of a personal impact as well, saying, "I have changed. I had spoken little in the past, but now I am more confident to negotiate with senior officers. These men accepted my views and later invited me to speak at several important events." Sisomphet has also noticed a shift in perspectives for herself and her organization. "Most projects [back home] are only talking about gender awareness. But after learning from the trainings we are able to see and address gender gaps. We are not only looking at the needs but applying the solutions," she explained. Chinneth agrees with this assessment, and added, "Women may be vulnerable, but women are agents of change."

Sunitha Bishan of the Penita Initiative in Malaysia said that since she joined the workshops, she has become a better negotiator. "Most of us negotiate in our own way and with a certain interest. But here we step back to look at the consequences of our actions and see how they impact our work," she says. Although she has been working on gender issues for 20 years, Sunitha said she actually learned something new from these workshops, and that the network is invaluable to her. "I was energized by the other gender champions in this initiative. I was going to leave my work but now I am back. This initiative has made me proud to be a feminist," Sunitha said.

While negotiation, communication and leadership skills were the focus at each workshop, the most recent training in the initiative focused on building train-the-trainers skills for the gender champions to plan for and deliver their own gender and climate change trainings in their home countries and institutions. Leilani Pais-Kambuou from the Office of Climate Change and Development in Papua New Guinea said that she feels more confident and would use the training skills to educate her own staff. "I am an environmentalist, so it was often challenging for me to find appropriate language and skills to train others on gender issues in climate change. I have learnt the skills now to make it work," she said.

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