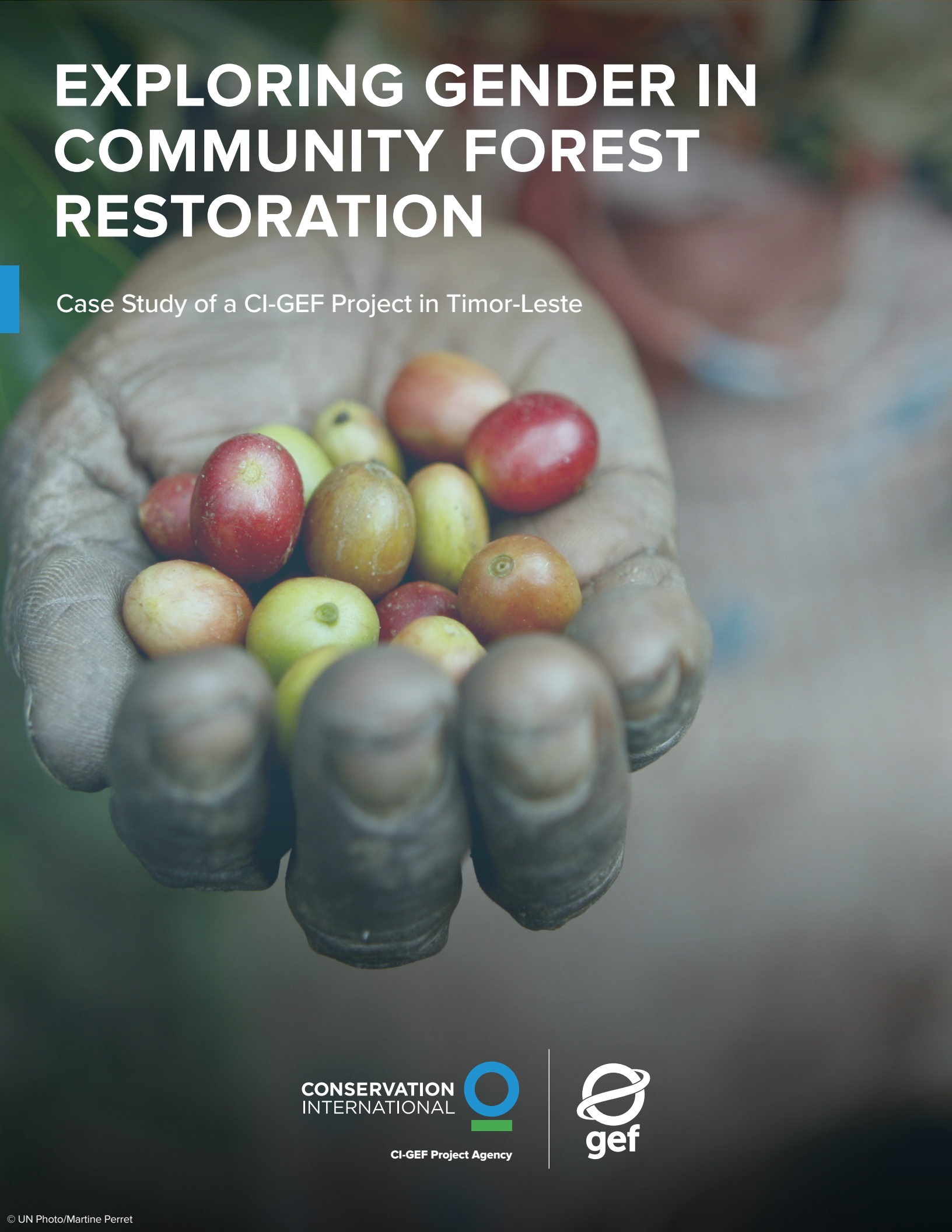


EXPLORING GENDER IN COMMUNITY FOREST RESTORATION

Case Study of a CI-GEF Project in Timor-Leste



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study documents the gender approach and investigates qualitative outcomes of a community-based conservation project supported by the CI-GEF Agency in Timor-Leste.

Through a systematic review of documents and primary data collected from community members and implementing partners, the case study documents: (1) the extent to which the project’s gender approach has influenced gender equality and women’s empowerment, (2) how that has contributed to project effectiveness, and (3) what supports were in place to successfully advance the project’s gender objectives and what challenges it faced. The goal of the case study is to provide real-life examples of gender integration and critically assess approaches, assumptions, and results in order to learn and adapt for future projects.

A local consultant collected primary data through a series of key informant interviews and focus group discussions. In total, more than 90 people were interviewed across five communities and implementing partner organizations.

The project’s gender approach was designed as being “gender sensitive” and focused primarily on participation targets. The CI-GEF Agency’s gender policy and requirement for targets and reporting was important for elevating the importance of gender considerations that led to the outcomes described in this case study. However, there is general agreement among interviewees that a more ambitious gender approach, going beyond participation targets with more direct efforts at empowerment, would have been well suited for this project. This more ambitious approach would include a good socio-economic baseline at the beginning, tailored gender approaches to different

communities, gender awareness and expertise among staff, partners, and communities, and monitoring changes in empowerment. While these are now requested by the CI-GEF Agency for new projects, prioritization and focus on these elements can be variable.

The case study does reveal some important outcomes of the project on gender equality and women’s empowerment, especially within the Comoro villages but less so in Irabere villages. This difference is attributed to existing socio-cultural attributes of those sites, with Comoro experiencing more outside influence and having established women leaders, while Irabere is more remote, with women experiencing more challenges in expanding out of traditional gender roles.

The case study also documents several examples of women’s engagement in project activities leading to more effective conservation outcomes. Interviewees gave varying reasons for this, including women being better at seed nursery management, and organizing and budgeting. Women also play a key role in water and fuelwood harvesting, so their interest and engagement in project activities is critical for long-term success.

Throughout the data, several clear supports and challenges to the gender approach became apparent (See Figure 1).

Importantly, the case study culminates in a series of lessons learned and recommendations for delivering gender outcomes in similar community-based conservation contexts:

- 1. A good gender approach should go beyond minimum sex-disaggregated targets and identify meaningful gender-related outcomes.
- 2. Collecting baseline socio-economic information is critical for designing a tailored, ambitious gender

Figure 1

Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The CI-GEF gender policy & requirement with clear reporting expectations• A clear participation target to clearly communicate expectations.• Existing strong women leaders in some of the Comoro villages.
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited baseline or background information no which to build a tailored gender approach.• Limited gender skills or expertise within the project team and no dedicated budget for gender-related activities.• Operating in a socio-cultural context that is highly patriarchal.

approach and for measuring change over time.

3. Prioritize gender awareness training and gender staffing early in project implementation and maintain consistent support.
4. Be creative about mainstreaming a gender approach into community-based training and capacity building.
5. Use gender as an avenue for greater inclusive and intersectional approaches.
6. Learn from, and collaborate with, local partners who may be stronger on gender.
7. Invest in a pipeline of women conservation leaders.
8. Include a focus on qualitative monitoring.

Exploring the efforts and impacts of a project's gender approach provides useful information about the effectiveness of interventions, the challenges, and opportunities that the project experienced, and insight into how to adapt and improve gender approaches more broadly. Case studies like this one provide an opportunity to do this, bringing together both quantitative and qualitative data to reflect on successes and lessons learned.

CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

Since its beginning in 2013, the CI-GEF Agency has taken a progressively proactive approach to mainstreaming gender into all projects.

In 2022, a gender review of the portfolio began to document good practices and lessons learned and identified several important areas for further consideration. As a next step, the Agency chose to do a deeper dive into a couple projects that were nearing completion, including this project in Timor-Leste¹. This project was selected for several reasons: 1) its strong focus on community-based conservation, 2) its length of implementation, being one of

the longest-running projects in the CI-GEF portfolio, and 3) indications from the portfolio review that there may be some good lessons.

The purpose of this case study is threefold: 1) to collect and assess qualitative information to establish to what extent the project's gender approach has influenced gender equality & women's empowerment, 2) understand how that has contributed to project effectiveness (achieving stronger outcomes), and 3) document what supports were in place to successfully advance the project's gender objectives. In this way, the case study provides clear evidence of process, context, results, and impacts, helping to guide future projects. Lessons will also apply to future GEF and GCF projects led by the CI-GEF/ GCF Agencies, the whole of Conservation International and other similar conservation organizations, and community-based conservation projects.

PROJECT CONTEXT

The project supports the Government of Timor-Leste in establishing a functional protected area system and improve the management of forest ecosystems in the Comoro and Irabere catchment corridors including two protected areas (Mount Fatumasi or Kutulau and Mount Legumau).

The project operates in 10 sucos (villages) home to more than 19,500 people. Project implementation began in 2018 and ends in December 2023. Executing partners include the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Environment, and Conservation International Timor-Leste. The project was financed by the GEF with a \$3,340,367 grant together with an additional \$12,292,000 in co-financing.



¹ <https://www.conservation.org/gef/projects-list/timor-leste-protected-area-network>

The protected area management approach promoted by the government and integrated into this project is focused on empowering local communities through collaborative management arrangements. There are clear socio-economic differences between the four villages located in the Comoro catchment, which are closer to Dili and have reasonably developed access to services, and the six remote villages in the Irabere catchment that are further from the district capital and have considerably lower levels of services such as access to health services, education, and markets.

Gender & Social Context

Despite national laws that guarantee equal rights for men and women, a patriarchal culture, especially in the districts, is an obstacle to the realization of equal representation at the local level². Traditional gender roles where men are viewed as heads of households and main provider and decision-makers, while women are responsible for family and household chores, are dominant across the country. Levels of gender-based violence are high, rooted in unequal gender norms, poverty, and the history of conflict³.

Agriculture is the predominant economic activity in the country and within the project sites. The gender division of labor in agriculture is clear, with men typically engaged in preparing land, collecting seeds in the forest, and collecting honey, while women are engaged in post-harvest activities, including drying and storing agricultural products and marketing. In the Comoro catchment,

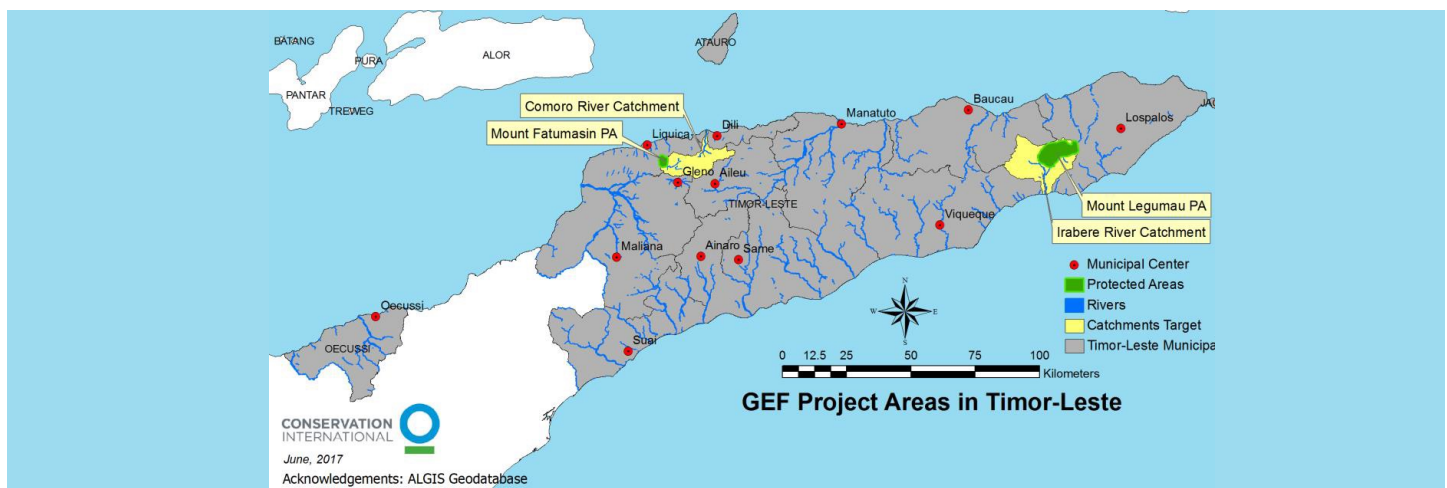
women struggle to find enough water at the end of the dry season, having to walk long distances and affecting their other responsibilities and family health. Among male and female farmers, gendered gaps in access to resources (e.g., literacy, labor, tools, and participation in farming groups) results in a productivity gap of more than 30%⁴. The project sites are patriarchal, which means that land is owned by men, but women are able to inherit land as part of a married couple.

One of the major drivers of deforestation in these areas has been the need for firewood for a quickly growing population⁵. More than 85% of households use firewood as their primary source of cooking fuel⁶. Firewood collection, practiced largely by women, but also men and children, is a key income generating activity for families and in some instances, is the only source of income.

The project team has observed that most community-level discussions are dominated by men, but if separated into focus groups, women are more at ease and talkative. Women know what they want to say but allow men to talk first and are afraid or shy to give their opinions in mixed groups. This deference extends to activities as well, where women may not take credit for their work and instead say it is their husband's.

Case Study Methodology

This case study's methodology for data collection is informed by similar gender case studies and was carried out by a Timor-Leste-based consulting team with



² Timor-Leste report to the CEDAW (2007)

³ Grameen Foundation (2021) Preliminary Gender and Inclusion Analysis for Timor-Leste. <https://grameenfoundation.org/documents/gender-inclusion-timor.pdf>

⁴ Women farmers in Timor-Leste (2018). World Bank: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/709001543605005333/pdf/132609-WP-EAPWomenFarmersFullReportv.pdf>

⁵ The 2023 census shows an annual population growth rate of 1.8%; the population will double in 39 years at this current rate (UNFPA press release)

⁶ Rahut, D., Mottaleb, K., Ali, A. (2017) Household Energy Consumption and Its Determinants in Timor-Leste. *Asian Development Review*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 167-197



experience conducting social surveys and focus group discussions. The consultants used a set of questions that were collaboratively designed and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with project-affected women and men (questionnaires in Annex 1). Interviews were conducted in Tetun and Makasai and translated to English.

The consultants collected information in two sex-disaggregated focus group discussions, coupled with at least two women KIs and two men KIs in 5 villages, which were identified by the project team (Comoro: Ulmera, Fahilebu & Leorema, Irabere: Bahatata & Baricafa). Additional KIs were conducted with relevant project staff (from Conservation International Timor-Leste and project partners) for a total of 91 people (50 men/41 women) across 10 focus group discussions and 29 interviews. A female interviewer led female interviews and focus group discussions, and a male interviewer led those for male participants. The consultants recorded detailed notes (not transcriptions) with relevant quotes and conducted initial coding of data into relevant themes as a first round of analysis. Additional observations from the project team were gathered during a group discussion in 2021 by the author as part of the CI-GEF portfolio gender review.

The Project's Gender Approach

It is important to place this project within the evolution of the CI-GEF Agency and the global conservation context. This project was designed in 2017 (GEF 6) and in alignment with the first GEF gender policy which was not prescriptive for projects. The GEF's second gender

policy, which was much more specific and ambitious at the project level, was released in late 2017. Mirroring this, the CI-GEF Agency's approach to gender and safeguards also increased in scope, specificity, guidance, and ambition. An example of this shift in ambition can be seen in terminology, with conservation organizations (including the GEF and CI-GEF) moving from a 'gender-sensitive'⁷ to a 'gender-responsive'⁸ approach.

Recognizing the influence of social and gender norms on environmental resource access, control, use, ownership, governance, and decision-making, the CI-GEF Agency requires that all projects take a systematic and proactive approach to promote gender equality and equity in all aspects of the project. To this end, the project designed a Gender Mainstreaming Plan (GMP) that provided a brief overview of gender issues in the country, referred to a coastal gender assessment that CI had previously conducted, and provided a series of considerations and approaches that the project should take. The project document frequently identifies key activities as being "gender-sensitive" (e.g., "develop gender-sensitive NRM plans") which influenced how activities were designed and delivered.

The plan identifies a target of 30% women in key activities such as representation on management committees, membership in conservation groups, and in project-related training opportunities⁹. This target is somewhat common in projects when there is no baseline, following the 30% rule of 'critical mass' influence in decision making¹⁰. As the project team described, beyond the target indicators,

⁷ Gender sensitive means understanding and taking into consideration socio-cultural factors underlying sex-based discrimination; in application gender sensitive has come to mean 'do-no-harm'.

⁸ Gender responsive means identifying and understanding gender gaps and biases, and then acting on them through actions to overcome challenges and barriers. In comparison to gender sensitive, gender responsive has come to mean more than 'doing no harm' to 'do better'.

⁹ And a 50% target for community consultations regarding protected area delineations

¹⁰ <https://www.ipu.org/file/6303/download>

the GMP was not very prescriptive in activities or how to achieve the targets. While this provided some challenges at the beginning in defining how exactly to approach gender integration (since there were limited gender skills on the team), it also allowed the team to be creative and adaptive, learning what works and what doesn't over time. There was no specific budget or stand-alone project activities related to gender in project design and no dedicated person to oversee the GMP beyond the general oversight of the project manager.

The two local partner NGOs that helped with capacity building have gender policies which had some influence on their approach and noted that these seemed to be more specific and ambitious than the project's (e.g., having a 50% target for female participation instead of the project's 30%).

The project team also noted that little was known about the social dynamics within the two project areas, and indeed, while there have been many national-level gender analyses over the years, there is a lack of (English-language) published literature that documents gender dynamics in the specific project site areas.

A government partner explained that there were some initial discussions about women's inclusion and gender equity in the project at the beginning, and because of this, some capacity building activities for women were explored. As members of the project team explained, simple efforts such as making it clear that women should be included, giving women an opportunity to speak during meetings, telling women their opinions are important, and encouraging them to engage, was helpful.

This section presents several examples of how gender considerations were incorporated into the community-based activities of the project.

Community Natural Resource Management Plans

A key project activity was to support the design of Natural Resource Management Plans in each of the 10 communities. Having recognized that women are more comfortable in separate groups, the process to design these plans was done with a gender approach, aiming to bring in men's and women's unique perspectives. During the community discussions, the facilitators organized men and women into separate group discussions in order to provide a safe and open space. Separately, each group identified the natural resources they have, their own

priorities and strategies for natural resource management (including tara-bandu customary laws) and then came together to share their ideas and collectively decide which ones were priority for the community as a whole. In general, the women's groups identified home gardens, income generation, and seedling production as priorities, while men's groups also identified home gardening, as well as tree planting, upland farming, and coffee rehabilitation.

Natural Resource Management Training

The project also provided training to community members on agroforestry and horticulture through local partner organizations. The tree nurseries included fruit trees which are considered a specific benefit to women as they are usually the ones to market them. There were also noticeable differences in the two project sites, with higher participation (overall and women specifically) in Comoro versus Irabere. Trainers observed that, despite some efforts to include women, their participation in Irabere was very low. They hypothesized that women were made to stay at home and observed that those that did participate were not well engaged.

Additional capacity building at a training center focused on permaculture and horticulture and primarily engaged youth. While most of the curriculum focused on technical topics, there were also some soft skills including planning, financial planning, and material management. The training center had two male and two female trainers, which helped to demonstrate that women can do physical work. CI selected the participants, specifically choosing 50/50 gender balance. Training staff observed that female participants were hesitant at first with some of the tasks and getting dirty, but that after seeing the female trainers doing it, were more enthusiastic. When accompanied and motivated, there was a clear growth in confidence. There was also some training and activities about water restoration (digging catchments, planting trees) which several interviewees reported has resulted in water continuing to run all year and in locations closer to the community, making life easier and allowing for better vegetable cultivation. This benefit is especially helpful for women who are generally responsible for gathering water; this new system saves time, stress, and reduces conflicts with other communities when water is scarce.

Community Conservation Groups

The project helped form community conservation groups who are responsible for maintaining nurseries and

planting trees. CI provided small grants to the groups to support livelihood growth (e.g., fruit trees, garden, chicken & goat husbandry, vanilla). Through various engagements, women were encouraged to join and contribute to these groups, with women making up an average of 31%¹¹ of the groups across the 10 villages and leading 3 of them as reported. As one project team member explains, while the women may not be often officially leading the groups, women were often behind the scenes “managing them to success”.

Project Staffing

The project team made some efforts to recruit and advocate for women to be in key positions. Interviews with project staff reveal that efforts were made to provide opportunities for women to join the project team and indeed, women did take on several important roles within the team over the years, but any significant balance was difficult due to the focus of the work (agroforestry) and work in remote places, which were less attractive jobs. Most applications for project roles have come from men, which is reflective of the wider gender imbalance of the formal labor market in Timor-Leste, especially relating to roles of forestry work. In this sense the project staff have actively sought gender balance within the project team and all adverts for project roles indicate encouragement of applications from women. This, however, has not had a noticeable impact on the ratio of applications.

According to the mid-term review, it was due to CI-GEF Agency’s requirements that two positions (of 13) on the Project Steering Committee were held by women. Despite special emphasis that women should apply during recruitment, only 2 of the 10 community members hired

by the project as Community Based Field Assistants are women, likely reflecting the norms and assumptions that women are not interested or able to do outdoor, physical labor. The project also built a link with the Australia Awards Fellowship program, which aims to find roles for scholarship winners once they return to Timor-Leste following their scholarship at an Australian University. This resulted in a female intern joining the team and subsequently being hired fulltime to work on the project.

While the Project Document lists a Gender/Social Inclusion Expert as a short-term project consultant, this consultancy did not occur. Likewise, the GMP does not indicate a specific role or person responsible for oversight and reporting on gender-related activities, and indeed, discussions with the project team reveal that there was no ‘owner’ of the plan, but the project manager held responsibility. Frequent staff turnover contributed to this.

Case study interviews with the three field staff members revealed that they all brought some level of gender experience with them from former work positions. It is not clear whether this was intentional during hiring or simply coincidence.

Gender Training and Awareness

The GMP called for gender training for all project staff with an annual target of all project staff receiving gender awareness training. Gender training was initially provided by CI’s global gender team in mid-2018 as the project was in the early stages of implementation and supplemented by a CI-GEF Agency training during supervision visits. Unfortunately, all of the project staff who were there at the time subsequently left and as of the mid-term review



© Conservation International photo by Katie Bryden

¹¹ As of FY22 Annual Report. Project team discussions reveal that this has since reached 36% and highlight substantial variations across the sucos with those in Comoro generally higher and Irabere lower.

in 2021, none of the current project staff had received any gender training, including the community-based field assistants. Interviews with current CI and partner staff confirm this, revealing that the gender plan and approach were not prominent features of the workplan, or onboarding, and that project staff did not feel well equipped with training and tools to effectively implement the gender plan. While the CI GEF Agency does require all projects to prepare a gender work plan (as part of the annual workplan), this was clearly not being shared or communicated widely across the team.

Project team members did share that the need to involve women in forming the conservation groups, and the importance of equitable engagement and benefits, was clear. The team was encouraged to be proactive in reaching out to women and knew of the targets for women's participation. However, there was a lack of more nuanced approaches and understanding of the 'why' and 'how'; as one community-based field assistant explained, while he knew of the 30% target number for women's participation, he was never trained on how to get women involved or empowered. Likewise, no awareness raising or sensibilization about gender and the benefits of women's inclusion was provided to the project communities.

Quantitative Results of the Project's Gender Approach

Quantitative data of these efforts were captured throughout the project and included in annual reporting to the CI-GEF. In alignment with CI-GEF reporting requirements, four indicators were identified in the GMP measuring (1) participation, (2) direct socio-economic benefit, (3) project team member training on gender

and (4) number of gender-integrated plans. These were complemented by other indicators in the project's M&E framework measuring: (5) number of people involved in project implementation (from the Stakeholder Engagement Plan), (6) number of youths trained in NRM, and (7) % of the 10 NRM community groups that are women.

The project team reported that having a simple, measurable 30% target was helpful in communicating gender ambitions to others and tracking progress over time, although the rather arbitrary percentage was perplexing. Table 1 provides the monitoring results for the project's gender-related indicators as reported in annual reports.

An important observation made during staff interviews, in the mid-term evaluation, and certainly within the primary data collected for this case study, is the variation in women's engagement across the different communities. While overall the target of 30% was met, it masks the fact that in some communities (e.g., Ulmera and Fahilebo) women were more engaged, while in others (e.g., Bahatata) women are much less engaged.

Qualitative Results of the Project's Gender Approach

While it is certainly important to identify and track quantitative indicators, important qualitative impacts and lessons can be lost without dedicated efforts to collect and analyze those data. This case study does just that, providing an opportunity to connect with project-affected women and men and select project partners to better understand their engagement with the project and the impacts that may have had on their lives. As stated previously, there was no baseline data collected before the project began so the information here is based off

Table 1: Monitoring results for gender-related indicators over the life of the project

	Target at project design	Fiscal Year (FY)19	FY20	FY21	FY22	Cumulative (as reported in FY22 report)
1. # and % of men and women that participate in project activities	30% women	348 (42% W)	631 (33% W)	579 (46% W)	1,795 (32% W)	1,795 (32% W)
2. # and % of men and women that receive benefits	30% W	116 (46% W)	417 (29% W)	568 (46% W)	1,815 (31% W)	1,815 (31% W)
3. # of plans that include gender considerations	16	0	Not reported	10	15	15
4. # of people involved in project implementation (annual basis) ¹²	100 people (no gender target)	114 (45% W)	426 (29% W)	579 (46% W)	588 (29% W)	1,707 (36% W)

¹² Includes Community Conservation Group members, Protected Area Management Plan developers, and Finance Plan developers.

people's perceptions and memories of how things were before the project compared to now. Certainly, memories are fallible, especially with disruptive events like COVID-19 such as occurred during this project.

Any impacts we point to here are simply a contribution to processes underway. Worldwide, gender and social norms are undergoing great change due to factors such as formal education, access to information, and globalization. These project sites are no exception, and this particular project is one small contribution to social change. Many interviews, especially those in Comoro, were clear to point to other entities who have provided education and awareness on issues such as gender-based violence, gender equality & violence against children. Likewise, strong leadership from women in villages like Ulmera in Comoro were already present and the project was able to build off that momentum.

It should also be noted that the interviewers observed that when asked about specific benefits that the project has provided, people frequently pointed to tangible and direct benefits such as income, improved water quality, or knowledge and tools for NRM activities, and often struggled to identify secondary, indirect benefits that participants might experience or observe such as increased self-confidence, respect from others, or increased safety.

Influence of the Project on Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment

In the villages where women were able to fully engage, they received direct income from working at the tree nursery for pay and sold seedlings & vegetables at the market, which was reportedly used for school and household needs. As research and evidence shows,

when women have increased access to, and control over income, their ability to make decisions over life choices and develop greater self-confidence also expands. A community-based forest assistant observed that the women who engage in the horticulture group and have seen income from sales have increased confidence. As a female conservation group leader in Comoro explained, “although we are women, we work like men, we do all the work that the men also do”, further explaining that women now do not need to depend on their husbands for household financial needs and risk them becoming angry or questioning their financial management skills. However, as noted throughout the case study, women in the Irabere catchment villages were much less likely to engage beyond participation in trainings and therefore did not benefit from income generation opportunities to the same degree.

The project's activities provided platforms (such as conservation groups or NRM discussions) that provided spaces for men and women to work together and allowed women to build and exercise leadership roles.

A women's focus group in Comoro reports that working together in the project's mixed-gender groups has been “eye-opening” and has also influenced collaborative working within households. Project staff observed that women who participate in the project are more confident and are better able to express what they like or don't like. These changes are also observed by male community members. A forest guard in Comoro explains that “in the past most of the women were passive in the decision-making moments and let the men decide and they would not dare to think about leadership positions, but the women who were actively involved the activities of the CI-GEF project, transformed their lives in the community.” A woman in a Comoro site was very positive about the



project's influence, explaining that before the CI-GEF project there was no balance in outdoor activities but because the project insisted on the involvement of women in the groups, there were more opportunities for women to join the outdoor activities. She goes on to say that women (like herself) now feel ready to generate income and lead a group. A community-based forest agent observed that "before CI started to work in our village, only men joined agricultural activities, but now we start to include women even in the activities, even though we still have a long way to go." And a women's focus group in Comoro explains that "the fact that [the project] chose a female group leader gave the whole community the confidence in women's leadership.

Importantly, these observations and sentiments are largely restricted to the Comoro catchment area, with women in Irabere seeming to feel much less supported, equipped, or enabled. For example, while there is a desire to start a women's group, it appears that the women are not confident enough to do so. Decision-making in the Irabere communities is largely male dominated, including whether women can join in project activities and what types of information they receive.

Interviews also pointed to broader changes in gender norms and women's roles, with an observation that people are more open to women doing outdoor, more physical, work, taking decisions, and recognizing that women are good at managing groups. Within the conservation groups, women have become secretaries, treasurers & leaders, leadership roles that the project has been able to provide, and which start to shift perceptions. A male focus group in Comoro explained that "there are changes of women's roles because now women can lead the group and make the decision in the community." Another male focus group in Comoro had a similar sentiment, saying that "now that the project involve the women and put them in a strong position, this is really helpful for us, men, to acknowledge the women's capacities." A village chief in Comoro asked for more capacity building for women to lead conservation groups be provided, explaining that the project has made good progress because now men are starting to understand and expect that women should be involved (although noting that there is still room for improvement).

Again, these observations of change come almost entirely from the Comoro area villages. In Irabere, key informants report that women are largely still hesitant to engage in project-related activities and the project has not brought

any evident change to gender norms and women's roles.

Likewise, there are examples of men taking on more of the traditional women's jobs. A male focus group in Comoro explains that the CI-GEF project has impacted men's awareness and women's own ideas about gender equality as they see women's responsibilities shifting from entirely focused on the home and children to now being actively involved in the project. According to them, this change has not led to any negative impacts on spousal relationships and has given opportunities to each other. These men also report a shift in household responsibilities, with men taking on some of the household duties to allow women more time to engage in project activities, demonstrating trust in each other's capacities. Interestingly, this is seen in the Irabere villages as well, where a female focus group shared that "after the [CI-GEF project] we added on efforts to share the work more equally. For example, men sometimes cook now so that women can take care of their gardens." Although they also note this is not universal and there are still women who are not allowed to do activities outside.

Benefits such as increased time and safety for women are important supporting factors for empowerment. The project's focus on improved water quality and quantity through restoration also has specific benefits for women who are primarily responsible for fetching water. In at least one village, this has significantly reduced the need to walk long distances (up to 1 hour and often done overnight) to other communities. Not only does this save women's time, but also reduces safety concerns on route, as well as reduces conflict over scarce resources with neighboring communities. Increased water also contributes to improved hygiene and health, additional benefits that women proportionately experience at higher rates than men.

The project has provided opportunities to advance the protection of human rights. Shifts in gender norms can often have impacts on gender-based violence, although those changes can be highly varied and unpredictable. While not directly asked in the interviews, a couple people in two sites within Comoro mentioned a reduction in violence as an outcome of the project. As a female group leader explained, "this CI-GEF project helps to minimize domestic violence because it minimizes the financial problems within the household."

Contribution to Project Effectiveness

A growing body of research continues to point to the benefits of inclusive conservation governance,



© Conservation International photo by Katie Bryden

pointing to the importance of capturing varied ecological knowledge, unique interests and priorities for conservation, and differing leadership styles, and how that leads to more effective, equitable, and sustainable conservation practice. When asked for examples of this, interviewees provided several instances where the project was improved because of the gender approach.

Women-led conservation groups were effective. As project staff observed, conservation groups led by women appear to be more successful in their horticulture activities than those led by men, pointing out that women play important roles in the nursery and conservation, becoming the main actors behind success of nursery management. A forest guard in Comoro observed that women have better results in their conservation activities, taking better care of the seedlings. As a men's focus group in Comoro shared, women are more constantly engaged in the conservation group compared to men who have to leave the village more often, resulting in their activities being more effective. Women are also considered good at managing the group budgets as well as organizing and monitoring seedling planting. A government extension worker in Irabere explained that “when women are involved in the activity, it is better managed and more successful.”

Women's use of natural resources is implicated in project objectives. Understanding how access or use restrictions may affect women and men differently is critical. In one community, a local law (tara bandu) restricts harvest of fuelwood to only loose and fallen branches. Women are primarily responsible for collecting firewood and now must search longer to collect enough. As a project partner explained, given women's role in selecting firewood and in using trees for their tais¹³, it is important to build their awareness through engagement in protected area development. As a CI field staff member recounted, working with the women's group to design a nature management plan for their protected area (from the women's point of view) strengthened them, as they had thoughts about nature protection and about their priorities and how they could take responsibility and help.

Supports and Challenges

The case study highlights several important supports that helped to advance the project's gender objectives, as well as challenges that impeded or limited greater success.

1. **Support:** A gender policy (such as that of the CI-GEF Agency) & requirement with clear reporting expectations.

¹³ Tais is a traditional handwoven textile used for decoration and ceremony.

2. **Support:** The 30% participation target to clearly communicate expectations.
3. **Support:** Existing strong women leaders in certain villages (in Comoro) that were already equipped to engage in the project and take on leadership positions.
4. **Challenge:** Limited baseline or background information about the gender & social context of the two project sites to design tailored approaches and create indicators on empowerment.
5. **Challenge:** Limited gender skills and expertise within the project management team and no dedicated budget for gender-related activities, with limited guidance on how to meaningfully mainstream gender beyond participation targets.
6. **Challenge:** Operating in a patriarchal culture and society that contributes to gender gaps in natural resource management and decision-making and is still strong in the project sites. Feedback in the interviews and focus groups consistently pointed to the persistent gaps, observing that women are still more likely to stay at home and look after children, preventing them from being involved in the conservation groups. Others noted that women are still seen as not capable of leadership. As a project partner observed, traditional gender roles continue to be the biggest challenge to having women benefit and enjoy freedom and opportunities equally to men. While the constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender, practices in rural areas especially are still very male dominated, with men deciding whether women can attend meetings and activities and women still burdened with household responsibilities and childcare.

Lessons Learned & Recommendations for Delivering Gender Outcomes

This case study provides an important set of lessons learned and recommendations that can be applicable not just for other CI-GEF funded projects but for community-based conservation initiatives in general. Many of these recommendations come directly from case study interviews.

1. **A good gender approach should go beyond minimum sex-disaggregated targets and identify meaningful gender-related outcomes.** While it is certainly true that the 30% target in this project provided an important motivation that led to the outcomes described here, a more ambitious and tailored gender approach could have achieved

more. As the project team rightly explained, if project activities are designed to align with women's specific interests and needs, they are more likely to choose to be involved. In this case, the project team said, had the project incorporated more household level farming, a priority for women, then more women would have been involved. This recommendation is well summed up by a project field coordinator "the staff also needs to have more training about gender equality and methods on how to achieve real equality and empower the women. We need more than just gender balance; equality is also about strengthening people's voice and their own ideas."

2. **Collecting baseline socio-economic information is critical for designing a tailored, ambitious gender approach and for measuring change over time.**

Differences between the two project site areas were evident in the context of gender, in that women's engagement in Comoro was generally much higher and more consistent than in Irabere. The project team identified that a more robust gender assessment (providing a baseline and highlighting the differences among villages) at the beginning would have helped to "understand who is accessing the resources, [contributing] economic value in the community and household and would have helped us to design [the gender approach]". This could have helped to design a more ambitious gender approach that went beyond sex-disaggregated targets and been able to achieve more robust gender outcomes. A more nuanced gender assessment could have also helped reveal how communication flows and how best to channel information to different groups. Several interviews point to information and communication (including language) as a barrier for women's participation, explaining that women in some villages or households are not getting information about the project or potential activities they could join. Finally, having a baseline would help to show change over time, beyond participation numbers and qualitative data like this case study.

3. **Prioritize gender awareness training and gender staffing early in project implementation and maintain consistent support.** While it is good that initial gender training was conducted at the start of the project, this was clearly not sufficient, and especially so in a project with high staff turnover. Ongoing support in the form of capacity building, mentoring, discussions on how to meaningfully

integrate gender, and troubleshooting challenges should be prioritized, especially for staff who interact most closely with communities and including relevant partner organizations. As an Irabere male focus group member explains “we need more training about how to communicate well and build trust between the men and women in the group or in the community.” Indeed, many interviewees in this case study – from project staff to partners to community members, asked for more training about the importance of women in agroforestry. Engaging community men and male leaders in gender awareness is equally important as they often act as gatekeepers to women’s participation, either providing support or barriers. As an implementing partner recommends, “whenever and wherever a project will start to work, they need to give training on gender equality to the local leaders and teach them how to organize the gender equality in all the activities in the village.”

Bringing onboard the right expertise early on can help with this. As the project team explained in 2021, they struggled at first to identify gender approaches and would have benefitted from a permanent person with some role and responsibility to oversee the GMP. Indeed, the CI-GEF Agency has increased their ability to provide gender support to projects including in-person training during site visits and guidance and tools to support gender mainstreaming. At the same time, the Agency now also requires that most projects include a gender & safeguards expert be included on the project management body and reviews for adequate budget allocation.

- 4. Be creative about mainstreaming a gender approach into community-based training and capacity building.** Much of this project’s gender approach was focused on participation targets, but other opportunities for meaningfully mainstreaming gender existed. For example, including discussion of gender norms in forestry within the NRM training curriculum could have facilitated critical analysis of gender assumptions and stereotypes. Feedback from interviews points to the importance of including not just technical skills in training sessions, but also ‘soft’ skills like leadership, financial management, effective communication, computer, and technology skills. Many of these skills are needed in order to help close leadership gender gaps. Relevant gender approaches for training and other project-related events can also include providing childcare or working around

childcare duties, as this is often a barrier for mothers to attend and did, in fact, come out as a barrier in several interviews.

- 5. Use gender as an avenue for greater inclusive and intersectional approaches.** It is important to recognize the great diversity within groups of women and groups of men; certain subgroups are more disadvantaged and have different needs. In this project’s context, young women, widows, teenage mothers, and daughters-in-law experience additional challenges that can restrict their ability to engage and benefit in the project. Likewise, identifying and reaching other subgroups such as people living with disability or youth, is important in order to tailor engagement but was missing from this project and noted in several interviews. As one focus group discussion shared, “there are several persons with disabilities in the community, they want to work with the project and the rest of the community, but they have not been given opportunity, most likely because of the family system [that restricts their engagement].” An intersectional gender approach that identifies the specific needs of sub-groups can be an effective platform through which to investigate, analyze, and respond to multiple forms of discrimination.
- 6. Learn from and collaborate with local partners who may be stronger on gender.** Establishing formal or informal relationships with organizations that focus on gender, human rights, development, or humanitarian relief in project areas can be a great way to quickly understand social dynamics and good, culturally appropriate practices or approaches. Formal partnerships can include joint activities or fundraising. In this particular case, there were clearly other organizations working on this issue in the same communities, as several interviews pointed to training on gender and financial literacy. The project team explains that they coordinate and discuss with these groups where their interventions overlap. Prioritizing strong relationships like this can contribute to a project’s gender outcomes.
- 7. Invest in a pipeline of women conservation leaders and support women’s groups.** At all levels of the project – within the project management team, field staff, and conservation groups, it was a struggle to achieve a gender balance in technical and leadership roles, despite dedicated attempts to recruit more women. This gap is likely to persist unless, or until,

young women and girls see these types of jobs or leadership positions as desirable. Similarly, identifying established leaders and supporting their existing efforts can be really effective, as evidenced in a couple of villages in Comoro. One method to do this, and as suggested in several interviews, is to support women's groups which provide more comfortable, safe spaces for women to learn, share, and test or grow their leadership skills.

- 8. Include a focus on qualitative monitoring.** As this case study shows, simple aggregated participation data barely scratches the surface in terms of the impacts and changes that the project is trying to advance. Incorporating space and budget for qualitative monitoring or review (like this case study) can provide important feedback that otherwise would be missed. For example, qualitative monitoring can reveal if information about the project is reaching everyone, and monitor adoption of new ideas and skills acquired from training. The CI-GEF Agency has recently updated the reporting format to solicit more reflections and narrative descriptions from project teams in an attempt to better capture impacts beyond numbers, and incorporation of qualitative indicators in the project LogFrame can be useful to ensure consistent monitoring & reporting.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the efforts and impacts of a project's gender approach provides useful information about the effectiveness of interventions, the challenges, and opportunities that the project experienced, and insight into how to adapt and improve gender approaches more broadly. Case studies like this one provide an opportunity to do this, bringing together both quantitative and qualitative data to reflect on successes and lessons learned. The purpose of this documentation is to provide real-life examples of gender integration and critically assess approaches, assumptions, and results in order to learn and adapt for future projects.

Through a series of interviews, focus group discussions, and document review, this case study aimed to answer three questions: (1) the extent to which the project's gender approach has influenced gender equality and women's empowerment, (2) how that has contributed to project effectiveness, and (3) what supports were in place to successfully advance the project's gender objectives (and challenges to overcome). The case study documented examples of positive impacts on gender equality and women's empowerment such as increased income, skills, and self-confidence for those women who were able to meaningfully engage in project activities. There was also agreement across the interviews that the project's gender approach led to greater project effectiveness, for example citing women-led conservation groups as being particularly effective. Importantly, the case study highlights supportive features that the project's gender approach experienced, such as having the CI-GEF gender policy and project gender plan to set participation and reporting commitments, as well as challenges including limited resources and technical support to go much beyond minimum participation targets to more meaningful gender achievements.

These findings are directly useful for the CI Timor-Leste team and the CI-GEF Agency as they embark on another CI-GEF funded project. Many of the observations and recommendations are also relevant for similar community-based conservation projects, regardless of funder or location. This case study contributes to a growing body of gender and conservation research, documenting different approaches and outcomes. Conducting similar case studies should be considered best practice in projects where gender outcomes are expected.

This gender case study was produced by the CI-GEF Project Agency.

*For further information, please contact **Ian Kissoon**, Senior Director, Environmental and Social Management Framework CI-GEF and GCF Project Agencies. Email: ikissoon@conservation.org.*

*Conservation International, 2011 Crystal Drive,
Arlington, VA 22202 USA*

Publication date: August 2023

Annex 1: Questionnaires

Individual Interviews & focus groups (female)

Community name:

Age:

Background:

1. What is your role or affiliation with the project?
2. Approximately how many years have you engaged in project activities?
3. Which project activities did you mostly participate in?
4. What specific gender equality activities of CI did you participate in?

Engagement:

5. What would you say is the level of engagement of women and men in the project's activities and outreach events? Are there some activities or events where women are more or less involved? Please provide a couple examples.

Observed changes at individual, household & community:

I'd like you to describe any social changes you have seen because of this project.

6. Focusing first on women, have you observed specific positive or negative changes for women?
 - a. What can you (or women more generally) do now because of the CI project that you couldn't do before? In other words, what has your (women's) involvement in this project helped you (them) to do differently?
 - b. Do you feel that your (or women's) leadership and ability to effectively participate in decision-making is improved because of the CI project? Please describe how/provide examples.
 - c. Do you (or women who participated) have increased tangible skills or capacity that you didn't have before?
 - d. Are you (or women who participated) treated differently by your family or community because of your involvement in the project?
 - e. Do you know of any negative impacts for women, or in the relationships between women and men, because of the project's activities?
7. Focusing next on men, have you observed specific positive or negative changes for men?
 - a. Is there a change in how men perceive and support women's engagement in project activities?
8. And then considering families & households, and the relationships of men and women in those spaces, have you observed specific positive or negative impacts of the project?
 - a. For example, are there changes at the household level in terms of roles and responsibilities for household chores?
 - b. Is there any change in terms of communication and trust within the household?
 - c. Are there any changes in how women's roles and leadership are perceived by the community as a whole?

9. In your opinion, what specific project activities or engagements have been the most influential in making those changes you described? Why? *(if needed, prompt for Community Conservation Groups & suco NRM plans)*
10. In your opinion, has the project's approach to actively and specifically engaging both men and women contributed to improved environmental management or conservation outcomes in your community? How or how not?
11. Do you have any suggestions for how CI's projects could be even more supportive of women's leadership and gender equality?

Individual Interviews & focus groups (male)

Community name:

Age:

Background:

1. What is your role or affiliation with the project?
2. Approximately how many years have you engaged in project activities?
3. Which project activities did you mostly participate in?

Engagement:

4. What would you say is the level of engagement of women and men in the project's activities and outreach events? Are there some activities or events where women are more or less involved? Please provide a couple examples.

Observed changes at individual, household & community:

I'd like you to describe any social changes you have seen because of this project.

5. Focusing first on women, have you observed specific positive or negative changes for women?
 - a. What can women do now because of the CI project that you couldn't do before? In other words, what has women's involvement in this project helped them to do differently?
 - b. Do you feel that women's leadership and ability to effectively participate in decision-making is improved because of the CI project? Please describe how/provide examples.
 - c. Do women who participated have increased tangible skills or capacity that they didn't have before?
 - d. Are women who participated treated differently by their family or community because of their involvement in the project?
 - e. Do you know of any negative impacts for women, or in the relationships between women and men, because of the project's activities?
6. Focusing next on men, have you observed specific positive or negative changes for men?
 - a. Is there a change in how men perceive and support women's engagement in project activities?
7. And then considering families & households, and the relationships of men and women in those spaces, have you observed specific positive or negative impacts of the project?
 - a. For example, are there changes at the household level in terms of roles and responsibilities for household chores?

- b. Is there any change in terms of communication and trust within the household?
 - c. Are there any changes in how women's roles and leadership are perceived by the community as a whole?
- 8. In your opinion, what specific project activities or engagements have been the most influential in making those changes you described? Why? *(If needed, prompt for Community Conservation Groups & suco NRM plans)*
- 9. In your opinion, has the project's approach to actively and specifically engaging both men and women contributed to improved environmental management or conservation outcomes in your community? How or how not?
- 10. Do you have any suggestions for how CI's projects could be even more supportive of women's leadership and gender equality?

CI & partners

- 1. What was your role/activity in relation to CI-GEF project?
- 2. Were you involved in gender training from CI-GEF?
- 3. Was the project's gender approach /plan explained to you when you started to collaborate?
- 4. How did the involvement with CI-GEF change your way of thinking and behavior towards inclusion of women?
- 5. Did you, as a result of this gender approach adjust your activities to be more women inclusive?
- 6. Apart from gender inclusiveness did you also consider other discriminated groups in your activity?
- 7. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in encouraging and engaging women to be active participants?
- 8. In your opinion, has the project's inclusive engagement of men and women contributed to improved project success or conservation outcomes? Please explain.
- 9. Is there anything you want to recommend to CI-GEF to enhance the project's approach to gender?