

LEARNING NETWORKS AND METHODS FOR INSTITUTIONALISING AND MAINSTREAMING LEARNING AND TEACHING PARTICIPATION

10

Co-learning processes in a participatory poverty reduction programme

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Exploring models
for collaboration

Introduction: participation in a Vietnamese context

This paper reflects on Vietnamese-Canadian experiences of promoting participatory development planning in a collaborative university linkage programme. The Canadian-funded Localised Poverty Reduction in Vietnam (LPRV) programme sought to build the capacity of higher education institutions to contribute to participatory poverty reduction through community-based projects and participatory curriculum development. The 'localised' dimension of the programme meant adapting poverty reduction methods to local administrative, cultural, and environmental conditions.

The authors of this paper have been involved (Scott) as a Canadian research associate, facilitating workshops in Vietnam, supervising interns' work in community profiling (as a preface to developing community-level poverty reduction project proposals) and contributing to on-going programme planning and lessons learnt, and (Chuyen) as a Vietnamese member of a university-based Centre for Poverty Reduction established through the LPRV programme, and engaged in workshops, community projects, and curriculum development. The observations we present in this paper are an outcome of our collective reflections over the past five years of the LPRV programme.

'Participation', in Vietnam and in Vietnamese, has multiple meanings and uses. Depending on the situation, *su tham*



Photo: LPRV

gia or *su tham du* can mean to be present, to be involved, to contribute, or to have voice. Participation in development has a multi-layered history in Vietnam. Vietnam is home to age-old practices of village-level collective action including participatory decision making, rotating credit groups, labour sharing, and other forms of mutual assistance. Layered amongst these experiences is the legacy of socialist planning (e.g. the structure of agricultural collectives and mass organisations such as the Women's Union, the Farmers' Association, the Veteran's Association, and the Youth Association). Such organisational structures were in theory as much bottom up

as they were top down.

Through the system of socialist planning implemented in the past half-century in northern (and, after 1975, southern) Vietnam, policies were introduced to minimise the social distance between leaders and 'the people'. 'Participation' largely took the form of class-based mobilisation of peasants and workers. The mass organisations provided an institutional basis for different groups in society to participate and to have their own voice. However, this did not always provide an enabling environment for effective participation in practice. Due to a series of internal and external factors, institutions grew less effective. Agricultural collectives were ambitiously expanded, only to face diminishing returns. It became difficult to motivate people for any kind of collective action, such as the maintenance of public works. People began to tire of endless meetings, empty slogans, and rhetorical speeches with few concrete outcomes to show for them. Overall, there was less interest in promoting participatory processes collectively than in seeking material gain individually. These sentiments were reinforced in the South as the country entered an era of post-war recovery with the reunification of North and South Vietnam.

The LPRV programme

While Vietnam has achieved an impressive record of poverty reduction in recent years, the number of impoverished people is still very high, and growing inequalities are a cause for concern. The LPRV programme was initiated by a group of people from Vietnamese and Canadian academic institutions, with the following goal:

To build self-sustaining capacity in the partner institutions to develop and teach low-cost, participatory policy assessment and project planning methods that are effective in generating appropriate solutions to localised poverty, and suited to Vietnamese cultures and administrative conditions.

The five-year programme (1998–2003) was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and involves two Canadian universities, the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (NCSH) in Hanoi, and five universities across Vietnam. An overview of the programme's partners, strategies, outputs, and scales of impact is provided in Table 1.

The programme emphasised not just the development of skills among individuals, but capacity building of institutions, particularly universities. A network of university-based Centres for Poverty Reduction (CPRs) was established, one at

Table 1: Overview of the LPRV programme

Main partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Canada: University of British Columbia and Université Laval; CIDA; World University Services of Canada • In Vietnam: NCSH; the Universities of Thai Nguyen, Vinh, Hue, and Dalat, and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City; national, provincial, and local governments and communities
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming a network of university-based Centres for Poverty Reduction • Testing and adapting participatory methods for poverty reduction in diverse social, cultural, and geographical contexts in 15 pilot projects nation-wide
Outputs and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New curriculum and training programmes for university students and state officials • Outcomes of community poverty-reduction projects • Policy recommendations
Scales of impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National and provincial level: via policy assessment activities and training courses for local officials; using NCSH contacts with various ministries; liaising with Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction programme committees • Local/community level: via learning-by-doing commune projects

each of the five Vietnamese universities, and a coordinating CPR at the NCSH. Each CPR served as a resource centre and a hub of activity for eight or more academics and a number of student assistants.

The programme engaged universities, local citizens and communities, and the state in 'testing' and adapting participatory project planning and policy assessment methods in diverse social, cultural, and geographical contexts in Vietnam. Each CPR practiced the methods in three pilot projects initiated in successive years. These pilot projects (ranging from irrigation pumps to livestock raising to eco-tourism) emphasised participatory processes, and the formation and strengthening of community groups, in some cases building on traditions of mutual aid and rotating credit groups. Reorienting the three main functions of universities – research, teaching, and community engagement – towards participatory action research to address poverty was the basis for LPRV's re-envisioning of the university as an engaged actor for poverty reduction efforts.

The institutionalisation – or, at least, institutional endorsement – of a participatory approach at the level of university heads was a key achievement of LPRV. With this

Community participation in one of the pilot projects



Photo: LPRV

impetus, several CPRs, in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs, have been involved in designing and delivering training on participatory planning for poverty reduction for district-level staff. CPRs have taken part in local-level committees of the national Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction programme, written monthly columns on poverty in a provincial newspaper, and profiled their community-based pilot projects on videos produced with Vietnam Television.

An enduring outcome and unique element of LPRV is the broad-based effort to have universities, in Canada and Vietnam, commit to a pan-university engagement in poverty reduction activity. Achieving this should yield a greater impact than would government or NGO-sponsored projects alone, or engaging individual academics in poverty-related consultancy, research or teaching. Although the long-term outcomes of LPRV remain to be seen, positive spin-offs are already evident. The CPRs will become permanent centres at the five Vietnamese universities. Some of the universities have established new programmes (e.g. the School of Social Work and Community Development at the University of Dalat) or

pan-university initiatives to institutionalise participatory action research and problem-based learning approaches (being piloted in the new Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Aquaculture at the University of Vinh). Plans are underway to sustain and expand the existing network of cooperation and communication among partner institutions in Vietnam beyond the culmination of LPRV in 2003.

Co-learning and facilitating participation in LPRV

The LPRV programme sought to facilitate participation at two levels: between Canadian and Vietnamese university partners, and between Vietnamese universities and local communities. The programme employed a mutual learning approach which acknowledged that learning is a two-way process. Throughout the programme, we attempted to overcome common asymmetrical relationships between partners in the North and South. Programme activities were not entirely pre-determined from the outset. This contributed to greater ownership of the programme by the Vietnamese partners, providing scope for adaptation according to their interests and capacities. The CPRs at each of the Vietnamese

Output of a community meeting



Photo: LPRV

“The LPRV programme engaged universities, local citizens and communities, and the state in ‘testing’ and adapting participatory project planning and policy assessment methods in Vietnam”

– and how planning for poverty reduction might take place. It is unfortunate that these diverging viewpoints were not sufficiently debated between Canadian and Vietnamese university partners, or with community residents.

Achievements in these micro-projects were mixed. In some ways CPR members fell back on conventional modes of service delivery or charity models, encouraging attitudes of dependency or applying participatory tools rather mechanically. This can be attributed to a number of factors:

- The short-term nature of the projects (one to two years) meant that the long-term relationships and trust needed to facilitate participatory processes were not fully developed.
- CPR members lacked experience with participatory planning tools and approaches.
- Due to their emphasis on ‘learning-by-doing’, most Canadian programme members did not want to over-direct the process of learning participatory approaches as might have happened in a more conventional, structured training programme. Canadians eschewed any references to their roles in LPRV as ‘coaching’ or ‘training’. As this approach was not fully appreciated by Vietnamese partners, it sometimes led to a perception that participation is all talk and no action. Well-structured training programmes could perhaps have more concretely and effectively demonstrated tools and methods for working with poor and marginalised people.

Although a process of participatory learning and planning should be a means to a better end, Vietnamese villagers and CPR members alike repeatedly voiced frustrations with excessive consultations that did not yield sufficient tangible outputs. Only after some immediate benefits are provided to community residents, they said, could issues of participatory processes be addressed. This attitude of favouring **product** over **process** seems to stem from previous experiences of participatory discourses under socialist development, which failed to deliver.

Specific funding had not been set aside for developing these micro-projects. The expectation (on the Canadian side) was that, rather than providing material inputs, there would be poverty reduction ‘initiatives’, e.g. organising groups to

universities facilitated communication of lessons internally. Lessons from the projects then fed into course books and training materials for university students, government officials, and others.

Community-based learning

Pilot projects in 15 communities were a way for universities to enhance their outreach and develop links with poor communities, and to practise and document their experiences of participatory project planning for poverty reduction. Following a series of workshops on foundational concepts in poverty reduction, learning-by-doing community planning, and related themes during the first two years of the programme, the university teams moved into an application of participatory planning approaches (e.g. community profiling) in the 15 pilot projects in the final three years. Through these activities, differences emerged, between and among Canadians and Vietnamese, over how poverty is understood and researched – as a process of positivist, externally-driven measurements, or a process of open-ended community dialogue and planning through a learning-by-doing approach

Thai Nguyen CPR
planning meeting



Photo: LPRV

qualify for agricultural extension training, to cooperate in food processing or marketing, or to develop a project proposal to submit to another funding agency. However, the CPR members soon realised the difficulty of initiating projects in poor communities without offering any 'goods' up front. This problem was raised with the Canadian university partners, and LPRV funding regulations were eventually amended to allow up to US \$10,000 for each community-level micro-project.

Participatory planning might also have been more effectively promoted by tapping into the significant technical expertise of many of the Vietnamese. Participatory methods and tools could have been more carefully integrated into specific fields or sectors such as public health, irrigation, animal husbandry, gender and forestry, community-based coastal resource management, or indigenous knowledge in primary school curricula, rather than developing more generic materials, e.g. manuals on gender and poverty reduction or participatory project planning and management. Despite the recent 'reinvention' of participatory development in community-level projects in Vietnam (led by NGOs or university partners), it will take a lot of convincing for local residents and technically-oriented academics to have faith that a participatory planning process will indeed yield concrete outcomes that are more appropriate and responsive to local aspirations.

Participatory curriculum development

Following the workshops in the first two years of LPRV, the CPR teams began to produce a series of course books for university students, local officials, and other practitioners. This participatory curriculum development exercise was a way for the Vietnamese university partners to synthesise their learning from the earlier workshops and to integrate their initial experiences from the community-level pilot projects. Drafts of each course book were presented at workshops for comments from other Vietnamese and Canadian programme partners. The material from some of these books has already been used in various training courses for local officials and university students. These attempts at drafting tools and methods appropriate for Vietnam are likely to serve as initial steps in a broader process of national curriculum reform.

Canadians disagreed somewhat on their interpretation of 'learning-by-doing' and therefore the extent of input to offer in the curriculum development process. The learning-by-doing approach provided space for people to experiment and make mistakes. However, the limited input from the Canadians and NCSSH meant that the books suffered from a lack of consistency, coherence, and clear criteria or standards against which to assess the final products. A closer working relationship between Vietnamese and Canadian partners, with Canadians providing summaries and additional materials,

might have improved the process and the final product.

Effective leadership and division of labour are not incompatible with participatory processes. The critiques and frustrations voiced by some (Vietnamese and Canadian) programme members reflected (1) a lack of central leadership and coordination of outputs, which stemmed from weaknesses in programme management, and (2) the passive rather than active facilitation role often modelled by Canadians. Many Vietnamese members seemed to be uncomfortable with the open-endedness of a learning-by-doing approach in which the process is given as much emphasis as the outcome. On the Canadian side, there may have been a tacit assumption that Vietnamese institutions (at the university or community level) were already participatory and inclusive. Or, Canadian programme leaders may have believed that long-term exposure and interaction would be more appropriate than directly intervening and questioning hierarchical relationships. The existence of such relationships became evident during the project, between university lecturers and community residents, and between junior and senior university staff (e.g. in terms of access to computers, information, and travel opportunities).

Conclusion

This article points to key challenges for North-South modalities of partnership in a postcolonial world, for overcoming the long legacy of northern countries' socio-economic, intellectual, and cultural domination over the South (Cebotarev, 1995). Conventionally, northern partners have their own research agendas and southern partners are confined to roles as implementers of research projects or recipients of training. Our efforts and analysis are a starting point to redress these patterns, but these (often sensitive) 'process' questions need to be examined in more depth. Our discussion of participation is also, necessarily, about relationships between partners and about creating a culture of learning within an organisation.

In sum, the main issues faced by Canadians and Viet-

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namese university partners in 'co-learning participation' through this programme can be summed up as follows:

- Epistemological differences concerning how poverty is understood and researched (see Shaffer, 1996), and how poverty reduction is envisioned;
- Culturally engrained social hierarchies in Vietnam (based on age, status, and education)
- The quality of academic outputs in the capacity building process; and
- Canadians' reluctance to give frank and critical feedback, in an attempt to avoid sensitivities and to be encouraging, recognising that learning is a gradual process.

The LPRV programme was an enormous undertaking, and we, as two individual authors of this paper, cannot claim to represent the viewpoints of all of those involved. The implementation of the LPRV programme was limited by some factors, such as hierarchical relations within universities, but was given extra impetus through other factors, including the priority given by the Vietnam government to poverty reduction. This context of participation had important impacts on the effectiveness and interpretations of participation in the LPRV programme. Mainstreaming participation requires a supportive macro policy environment from the state, plus specific initiatives from universities to gradually make new approaches commonplace and to prove the effectiveness of the outputs of participation. In this way, institutions gradually change. LPRV is one example of an effort in this direction.

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- For more information about the LPRV, visit the English version of the LPRV website www.chs.ubc.ca/lprv