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Participatory poverty research and policy influencing in PRSP processes: the Vietnam case

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Background

Vietnam has undergone a period of rapid change since the mid-1980s. The *doi moi* reform period marked a significant shift away from a centralised command system towards a greater reliance on market forces and a more liberalised policy framework to stimulate economic activity.¹ The Vietnam Communist Party – the only institutionalised political party in the country – led the reform and tried to reach consensus by mobilising all social and economic players, including national research and development centres and associations (may be termed ‘local non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs) in the Vietnam context), as well as international donors and international NGOs (INGOs).

The result was major improvements in living standards for a significant majority of Vietnamese people. Based on an internationally comparable expenditure poverty line, 29% of the population was poor in Vietnam in 2002, compared to 37% in 1998 and 58% in 1993. Key human development indicators, ranging from education enrolment to infant mortality, also improved significantly. However, major concerns remain about the quality and sustainability of future

pro-poor growth and the efficacy and accountability of public spending for poverty reduction and social welfare. The pattern of poverty across regions is very uneven and inequalities are rising. A ‘hard core’ of poor people, especially in remote areas with concentrations of ethnic minorities, is emerging with specific constraints like landlessness, unemployment, vulnerability to natural calamities and market shocks, and social exclusion.

Process

Since the early 1990s, small scale Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) at district or community level have been used in Vietnam by INGOs and some donors to guide their own programming. The World Bank’s initiative in 1999 of a world-wide consultation campaign for its 2000 World Development Report (WDR) created a valuable opportunity to undertake four much larger-scale, provincial PPAs. Later on, village consultations in six provinces were organised to provide the feedback of the poor to the early draft of the PRSP (termed the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) in Vietnam). In 2003, the PPAs were scaled up to 12 provinces throughout the country to provide the feedback of poor people in the implementation of the CPRGS. Some pilot supports for a provincial ‘roll-out’ of CPRGS are underway, and participatory policy consultation is one key step in the initiatives at provincial level.

The participatory qualitative studies helped deepen aware-

¹ *Doi moi* translates as ‘renovation’. In 1986 a new set of leaders, following China’s example, put aside the old dogmas and embraced the free market.

Box 1: CPRGS's policies and possible PPA's influence

The Vietnam CPRGS (the first in Asia) was approved by the Prime Minister in May 2002. It was preceded by an I-PRSP in 2001 and a series of consultations across the country in 2002. It talks about three broad groups of comprehensive policy actions for both economic growth and poverty reduction:

- completing the transition to a market economy, fostering competition and levelling the playing field between private enterprises and state-owned enterprises (SOEs);
- building of modern governance, covering such areas as public financial management, public administration reform, and legal reform; and
- keeping development socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable in all areas affecting the poor, such as agriculture and rural development, health, education and infrastructure.

Because poverty analyses are grounded on a household perspective, the PPAs often focus on providing feedback on the 'inclusive development' policies rather than the other 'structural' ones.

ness of poor people's lives amongst government staff engaged in the process, and increased awareness of the process and principles of qualitative research. The findings on poor people's living conditions were not new ideas, but their importance means that they should be emphasised in policy formulation. In fact, the earlier draft CPRGS and its annual implementation report and poverty reduction strategies/plans in the pilot provinces, took into account many recommendations from the participatory qualitative studies and consultation. Though it is never easy to attribute the policy changes to the research findings, it was observed that the key influences are:²

- **High direct costs of basic social services.** All PPAs and consultations, from the biggest cities to the most remote villages, reinforce the message of the poor's inability to afford education and healthcare services. In response, the government then initiated programmes of education for all (EFA) and a national healthcare fund for the poor.
- **Social exclusion of urban migrants.** The earlier draft CPRGS does not mention the status of urban migrants in accessing urban services. The PPA findings influence directly and indirectly (by providing the Urban Forum working group with evidence to make an influential submission to the government) the contents of the final CPRGS to include a statement of inclusive service delivery in urban areas.
- **Local participation in infrastructure development.** The government intends to use infrastructure development as a means of improving market access and generating

employment for the most difficult communities. However the PPAs and consultations reveal that without more participation in the whole cycle of the projects, the poor are unlikely to get desired benefits. The final CPRGS then included several specific commitments to change this situation. A governmental decree on monitoring local people on any investment projects in their communities was promulgated, for instance.

- **Transparency and accountability.** The local participants in PPAs and consultations suggest sharper identification of the poor for targeted programmes, better communication about policies and programmes/projects, and practical ways to implement the grassroots democracy regulations. The final CPRGS had separate sections to deal with these issues. Later on, the grassroots democracy decree was revised to introduce more transparent and accountable mechanisms at local level.

Critical factors

There are several critical factors that some consider to have contributed to the process of linking participatory research and policy-making in Vietnam.

- **Working in partnership.** The Poverty Task Force (PTF) – set up in 1999 – is the main mechanism for government-donor-NGO interaction on strategic planning for poverty reduction. Through the PTF, the donors and NGOs were actively engaged in funding and organising the PPAs and community consultations. The PTF facilitated the discussion about participatory research with key government officials from designing the core policy questions to disseminating and digesting the recommendations. Without the backing of the PTF, there is a risk that the participatory research could have been seen as marginal and 'un-scientific' activities.
- **Good timing in the whole policy process.** The recent participatory research was embedded in national policy-making processes. The PPAs were fully part of the workplan anticipated by the PTF. The findings were timely in influencing the policy content of the PRSP papers and the annual implementation reports. In fact, the PPAs would be less useful if they only served as the 'post-PRSP' monitoring and evaluation (M&E) where the government might still rely much on its statistical data and internal reporting mechanisms.
- **Common research framework.** The participating agencies and core researchers spent many hours together working through a common research framework. A concrete statement of issues and questions was valuable in building a shared understanding of what the research was seeking to achieve, and making the task of aggregating findings

² Key references for this paper are Shanks and Turk, 2003 and the Vietnam Development Report 2004, as well as the author's direct experiences of leading the PPAs and community consultations in Lao Cai and Tra Vinh provinces in Vietnam.

easier. The consensus on a research framework also helped to focus on hot topics (e.g. pressing policy questions in public services access at local levels) on which that the government is seeking answers.

- **High quality fieldwork.** The participatory assessments were facilitated by local researchers and institutes with strong networks. Many facilitators had a previous history in implementing the PPAs in the same or similar contexts. The mobilisation of local government counterparts (from provincial, district and community agencies) also helped bring insights into the findings. Specifically, this local expertise was very important in PPAs that required a good attitude and a high degree of flexibility in working with poor people in poor areas.
- **Combining qualitative and quantitative analysis.** The findings from participatory research are combined with data from the Vietnam Living Standard Survey (VLSS) to produce poverty and policy papers. This combination can overcome the inherent limitations of either qualitative or quantitative methodologies (i.e. unrepresentative vs. causal-blind). The crosschecking in fact saw no major differences between the two kinds of findings. Some policy issues that emerged from qualitative research would not emerge from the quantitative analysis of VLSS alone, e.g. the social exclusion of poor urban migrants or the inadequate participation of the poor in rural projects.
- **Using the findings to influence through different channels.** The traditional channel is through publishing the reports, and quickly disseminating them to the main audience – the CPRGS steering committees and relevant ministries. There were other attempts to broaden the way in which the findings were used. Some examples are:
 - working with PPA provinces (e.g. Lao Cai, Tra Vinh) in rolling out the CPRGS, so that the findings were introduced, validated and integrated into the provincial planning process;
 - presenting and disseminating the findings at various national, regional or thematic workshops so they could be referred to in the subsequent discussions among the workshop participants;
 - assigning PPA core researchers directly working with drafting team of CPRGS annual implementation report to ensure that the key findings were integrated in the report; and
 - introducing the methodologies and findings to national and local research institutes to raise their awareness, interests and capacities of undertaking participatory researches in the near future.

Box 2: Using PPA findings to influence the pilot CPRGS roll-out in Lao Cai province

In July 2003, the PPA was undertaken in the northern mountainous province Lao Cai where 70% of the population are ethnic minorities. The PPA team comprised six national researchers from Hanoi and 20 provincial officers. Because this PPA was carried out in exactly the same communities as the last PPA in 1999, the team was able to explore deeply the changes and the causes of changes over a four-year span.

After the PPA, Oxfam GB and DFID VN collaborated to pilot a CPRGS roll-out exercise in Lao Cai. The PPA team leader and other facilitators worked closely with provincial agencies to ensure that the core PPA findings could be integrated into the province's poverty reduction policies. In late 2003, a workshop 'Lao Cai: attacking poverty' was held, where the provincial poverty reduction papers and the PPA findings were presented. Representatives from all researched districts and communes attended the workshop and discussed the findings.

The key lessons from the above process are:

- The capacity of the national researchers and provincial officers in linking PPA with analysis of national policies must be enhanced, so that the local realities can better influence the policy actions.
- The PPA findings may appear in the policy writings, but still hardly influence the actual resource allocation for poverty reduction. Here the whole budgeting process should be reformed.
- The provincial authorities welcome the support in pro-poor planning, but would better appreciate it together with other 'visible' assistance from the donors and INGOs. So, it is difficult to avoid some biases in the process.

Challenges and ways forward

The PPAs may well illustrate the poverty profile and factors, however they often give a weak and fragmented picture of the governance issues. In the focus group discussions about the implementation of grassroots democracy decrees or of public administration reform, the facilitators are often faced with the 'we don't know' answer from the local participants. The underlying causes are that local participants are still not 'familiar' with talking about such sensitive issues, and the facilitators from outside often find it difficult to pose answerable questions in order to link the specific micro realities with the macro governance policies.

The INGOs can commit financial and human resources to undertake PPAs and other participatory work related to the agenda agreed with the government agencies and PTF. Participating in the PTF, the INGOs have better opportunities than through other channels to influence the formulation, implementation and monitoring of the CPRGS. The INGOs have a limited representation on the PTF, as only four to five big and active INGOs are rotated as PTF members with the coordination role of the NGO Resource Centre. In response to the

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considerable interest that was shown in the preparation of the CPRGS, a Poverty Working Group (PWG) was established in 2000 to keep a wider group of donors and INGOs informed about the activities and outputs of the PTF. However, the roles and agenda of the PTF and PWG are not so clear in the future when the CPRGS will be integrated into the formal socio-economic planning process of the government.

The local NGOs still have a limited role in the PRSP process. They often work ‘to call’, i.e. as subcontractors for international donors and INGOs in carrying out the PPAs and community consultations. The one-off consultancy nature of the local NGOs in PRSP process makes it difficult for them to proactively link the policy process with continuous M&E at local levels. Due to human and financial constraints, almost no local NGOs could initiate participatory research or produce their own monitoring reports on the macro-economic policy issues. The government agencies or the PTF often invite them to participate in policy dialogues (through attending workshops, delivering presentations or providing feedback on draft papers), but without well-prepared arguments and in-depth comments, their independent contributions can hardly be influential.³ The increased capacity of the local NGOs and the enabled institutional settings for their policy-related work are both critical in the future.

The PPAs and consultations are largely extractive research exercises. At the moment, most of the researched sites have been benefiting from community development programmes

³ There is one regulation that all draft policies affecting certain groups must be consulted with the relevant associations before submission to the government.

of the donors and INGOs for many years. So, hearing the voices of the poor also benefits the donors and INGOs themselves in improving their programmes there. One suggested way forward is to establish a network of ‘check-points’ at local levels to periodically monitor the poverty reduction policies. The PPAs in 2003 already tried a methodology of selecting the research sites from the VHLSS-surveyed communities so that the qualitative and quantitative findings could better interact with each other.

The CPRGS paper already clearly stipulated that participatory assessments are one component of monitoring the implementation of CPRGS at local levels.⁴ The pilot rolling-out of CPRGS in some provinces have been placing PPAs and community consultations within the official planning process. However, the authorities’ ownership of the participatory process is still weak. It is noted that besides the 2003 PPAs and pilot roll-out exercises, there are almost no other remarkable and systematic means of monitoring the CPRGS at local levels in a participatory manner. Such PPAs and consultations with the poor were led by the international donors/INGOs, and conducted by the city-based local NGOs and researchers. Though the provincial agencies provide human resources to support such work and they appreciate the findings very much, they still hardly originate or finance such work themselves. In other words, the demand for participatory research in government agencies is still reactive. There are also concerns that the PPAs may divert attention away from the need for more mainstream mechanisms for state-citizen interaction.

The participatory poverty assessments can effectively bring the voices of the poor into the planning and implementation of policies affecting their lives. Hopefully, the above critical challenges of institutionalising participatory methods in evidence-based and pro-poor planning and policy work at all levels will be gradually overcome in the future.

⁴ The other core/more important components of CPRGS’s M&E are statistical data including the government-led multi-purpose VHLSS survey, and internal reporting within government agencies.

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