



**Gender, WASH and education case study:**

**An insight paper from Viet Nam**

## **Introduction**

Viet Nam has made remarkable strides in educational achievement over the past 50 years. In 1945, more than 95 per cent of adults were illiterate, but by 2006, nearly 93 per cent were literate.<sup>1</sup> Even so, in 2009, there were still 4 million people who had never attended school (5 per cent of the total population aged five years and over). There is still a need to raise educational standards, and to improve the quality of education and equity of access. This is especially the case for girls and children from ethnic minorities – who have the lowest enrolment rates in the country – and those living in remote areas. The developments of Universal Primary Education (UPE) have yet to extend to all children.

The wider social and economic inequalities driving group-based marginalisation in Viet Nam have important consequences for education. While provision for ethnic minority groups is improving, it still lags far behind provision for the majority Kinh population. Twenty-five per cent of minority children do not enrol at age five, compared with 5 per cent of Kinh children. Around 30 per cent of minority households report at least one child dropping out of primary school, which is double the figure for Kinh households.<sup>2</sup> Two of the four main reasons for dropping out – being unable to afford school fees and needing children to work instead – are directly related to poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Gender disparity is also greater in ethnic minority communities. While national statistics show that in the 10–14 age group, 98.1% of boys are literate and 98.2% of girls<sup>4</sup>, the gender gap between ethnic minority girls and boys is large, even at primary level, standing at 5%, 7% and 20% for the Dao, Thai and H'Mong groups respectively.

The quality of basic education is another cause for concern. Though they may succeed in progressing through the grades, ethnic minority children still struggle with basic literacy and numeracy skills, including poor oral skills. The quality of education very much depends on the quality of teaching. Many teachers use traditional teaching methods that fail to encourage active learning. While ethnic minority children account for 18 per cent of the primary school age population, ethnic minority teachers make up just 8 per cent of the teaching force. Moreover, few of these teachers are posted to ethnic minority areas, and few have the training or experience to teach bilingual education. As a result, Kinh remains the dominant language of instruction for most ethnic minority children.<sup>5</sup> Children's cultural context is less understood, and there are few role models to inspire children and raise their aspirations.

Local authority support to improve teaching methods or professional development is weak, evidenced by insufficient allocation of resources. While 18 per cent of the state's budget goes to education (and just over half of that goes to primary and lower secondary schools), most of this goes on teachers' salaries, and there is little left for improving teaching and learning methods and the learning environment, or providing materials.

Poor health and nutrition are also strongly linked with poverty and underachievement in school. In Viet Nam, Oxfam has worked closely with local partners to improve water and sanitation facilities in schools and to increase children's understanding of good hygiene habits. Together, we have achieved better rates of school attendance, and promoted positive attitudes towards girls' education and rights, alongside the rights of indigenous cultures. This, in turn, has led to a more confident engagement by different ethnic groups in school activities, promoting greater ownership and accountability.

## **Key education challenges in Lao Cai province**

Lao Cai is one of the provinces Oxfam works in, and is a poor, mountainous province in the north of Viet Nam, bordering China, 400km from Hanoi. Winters are extremely cold, especially in the districts of Sapa and Bat Xat. Two-thirds of its 600,000 population belong to

25 ethnic minority groups. It is one of the poorest areas of the country, with an annual per capita income of \$300 compared with national per capita income of just over \$1,000.<sup>6</sup>

Levels of educational attainment in Lao Cai province are among the lowest in the country, especially for women and ethnic minorities. In the 15–25 age group, 10 per cent of people from ethnic minorities are illiterate and 95 per cent of those are women.<sup>7</sup> In 2005–6, before Oxfam’s project, enrolment rates stood at 89 per cent (preschool), 92 per cent (primary) and 90 per cent (lower secondary). Although these rates are high, attendance rates remained low, at 75 per cent, 81 per cent and 76 per cent respectively, even dropping as low as 60 per cent in some communes. The primary school dropout rate is 1.9 per cent, rising to 9.95 per cent at lower secondary level. The main challenges include poor quality of teaching due to inadequate teacher training.

Gender disparity is most apparent at lower secondary level, particularly in the more mountainous and remote areas of the province. Local authorities have an inadequate understanding of the factors that drive gender inequalities, and communities often fail to recognise the right of girls and minority children to attend school regularly. Girls’ access to education is a particularly serious issue among H’mong families. Traditions of early marriage, arranged marriage and large families reinforce the vicious cycle of poverty, poor health and low literacy levels.

The topography of the highland area of Lao Cai presents its own challenges (see Box 1). The population is widely dispersed, and there is very limited transport and communications infrastructure, making the provision of education services difficult. Many young children have to walk a long way to school, and in more remote areas, have to board. To address these issues, the government has tried to build ‘satellite’ schools (small schools in the most remote villages attached to a main school in the commune centre) and has set up a network of boarding schools. However, these often lack adequate facilities (including bathrooms and accommodation) for both students and teachers, most of whom are not local. The teaching and learning facilities are often poor and inadequate. For instance, although some teachers have recycled local materials to make their own teaching aids, what they have managed is still too little compared with the minimum requirement for pupils’ learning activities. Shortages of desks, chairs and tables, blackboards, exercise books and pens are typical.

### **Box 1: Providing schools with clean water**

*‘Without safe water, our life is very tough here because we have to climb up and down nearly a kilometre for taking water from the stream for daily usage, bathing and cooking.’*

Nguyen Thi Huyen, who has been teaching for four years at Trung Leng Ho Primary School, in Bat Xat district.

In 2008, a tropical typhoon affected Trung Leng Ho Primary School when a landslide destroyed the water supply system. Teachers and students, some of whom board, were without clean water for many days. The school received £700 from Oxfam’s project to rebuild the water supply system. It now provides clean water not only for students and teachers but also for a nearby preschool, a lower secondary school and the health centre. About 300 students and teachers have benefited.

### **Oxfam’s education programme**

Since 2003, Oxfam has applied a comprehensive approach to its education programme by targeting support to different groups, including students, teachers, parents, and district education managers. We have been working with Lao Cai’s Department of Education and Training (DOET) since 2007 to help achieve its education development priorities and goals.

These include consolidating the achievement of UPE and improving access to lower secondary school. The programme has moved from a focus on quantity to quality of activities. For example, as well as building 10 latrines in ethnic minority schools, we will also monitor outcomes in terms of girls' attendance. By 2010, 61,300 students in 244 primary schools in Lao Cai had benefited from our activities, directly or indirectly. We have also trained 4,990 teachers in child-centred teaching methods (CCM), and provided support to 527 education managers. Other initiatives include supporting parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and making schools better, safer environments for children (child-friendly schools).

Oxfam's project in Lao Cai has four components:

- improving the quality of teaching and learning outcomes through promoting child-centred teaching methods,
- promoting community participation in improving the quality of basic education,
- building education managers' capacity for effective management, decision-making and participatory planning,
- communicating good practices locally and nationally and promoting their adoption as policy.

Gender and diversity issues have also been addressed through promoting girls' education and the preservation of indigenous cultures.

The models used (including teacher training using CCM, child-friendly schools, school transition and supporting PTAs) have demonstrated to both the Government and donors the need for an integrated approach to ensure adequate education provision in remote and disadvantaged areas.

The WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) activities aim to build adequate facilities for child-friendly schools. Although the government has built many new schools in Lao Cai, they often lack proper toilets and water supply systems. It is estimated that just 47 per cent of schools (758 out of 1,596) have hygienic toilets.<sup>8</sup> In those schools that do have toilets, they are often dirty and poorly maintained. Cleaning toilets is sometimes considered a student's duty, or in some cases pupils clean the toilets as a form of punishment. In addition to inadequate toilet facilities, many schools lack facilities that would make them more child friendly, such as outdoor play areas and fields planted with shrubs and trees.

### **Participatory planning and assessment**

The project cycle included identifying problems and needs in each of the 18 schools involved. The assessment process included whether the school had facilities such as clean and separate toilets for boys and girls, adequate water supply systems, and a green environment. It also considered students' needs for extracurricular activities, and the relationships within schools, between teachers and parents, and with local authorities and others in the community.

Participants (teachers, parents and education managers) worked together to develop action plans, and then implement, monitor and evaluate the activities. The assessment process required their active participation. While taking actions to improve the school environment, the process also helped to improve relationships between these stakeholders.

The project provided training for headteachers, teachers and district education managers on child-friendly school criteria, assessing the school environment, and planning, monitoring and evaluation (see Box 2). This helped them to develop a common understanding of what constitutes a child-friendly environment, and to assess how their school was doing and prioritise the improvements needed.

The participatory nature of the school assessment process was crucial to its success. It enabled all those involved to discuss problems and identify possible solutions. Participants were able to make proposals and reach a consensus on an action plan, setting out what to do, when and how, as well as who was responsible for which activity, and where to obtain resources. The action plan is recommended by the school and parents, and approved by both the commune authorities and the District Education Department.

The parents contribute ideas, as well as materials and labour for making some of the agreed improvements. The commune authorities and District Education Department are responsible for mobilising external resources as well as allocating small funds (taken from the commune government budget) to support school activities. Teachers contribute ideas and two or three days' salary each month to facilitate the process of planning, implementing and monitoring the action plan.

### **Box 2: Helping staff and headteachers improve learning environments**

*'The teachers are more active in applying new teaching skills learned from Oxfam's training courses and students' results are much better in comparison with two years ago.'*  
Ngo Van Lang, headteacher at Trung Leng Ho Primary School, Bat Xat district

Ngo started teaching more than seven years ago in this remote school, which serves H'mong students. He has been headteacher for the past four years. He believes that taking part in Oxfam's project has really enhanced the school's teaching, planning and management capacity. They have adopted CCM teaching principles, and improved the school environment. In 2008–9, the provincial DOET awarded Lang the status of third most excellent headteacher in the province. Lang has set a target to make his school the best in this remote and mountainous province over the next five years.

### **The child-friendly schools model**

Creating a child-friendly school environment means that schools should be places where:

- all children have access to education, and are respected, listened to, and protected. This includes children from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds and those with special abilities or learning needs.
- children play, explore, actively learn and are prepared for life.
- families, communities and schools work together to build a safe, healthy and welcoming environment.

The theory behind the model is simple: when schools become greener, cleaner, and more welcoming to children, and have decent facilities, more students will want to go to school and stay on in school. This kind of support may be regarded as basic, but it is much appreciated by teachers and students in remote areas because it has made a big difference to their school environments.

In Lao Cai province, there was limited awareness and understanding among teachers and parents of the need to improve the school environment. This led Oxfam to develop a strategy to make schools more attractive to students, thereby getting more children into school and making them less likely to drop out. Oxfam has supported its partners, the Lao Cai DOET and two District Education Departments (in Sapa and Bat Xat) to initiate and pilot the child-friendly schools model, working closely with headteachers and schools.

The child-friendly school model is integrated with the other models. Indicators were developed to assess changes in schools, including the physical environment (green, clean, decorated) and relationships (friendly, respectful, and responsible relationships, among teachers, between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents and the wider community).

Oxfam provides the following support to 11 schools in Lao Cai (including eight primary schools and three boarding lower secondary schools in two districts, Sapa and Bat Xat):

- water and sanitation facilities (building toilets, providing water filters, building and repairing water supply systems, and building bathrooms for boarding schools),
- classroom repairs, including painting and decorating inner and outer walls,
- trees for planting/gardening, and fences and gates for the school campus,
- mobile libraries, playground swings, and loudspeaker systems and keyboards for extra-curricular activities.

As mentioned above, during the school assessment process, a number of schools identified water and sanitation problems, and included promoting good public hygiene practices in their action plans. Some examples of Oxfam's support to these issues include:

### *Basic hygiene*

Most children, particularly those at primary school, do not have soap or toothbrushes at home, so do not know how to wash their hands and face and brush their teeth properly. The teachers have taught the children to wash their hands properly, and comb and tidy their hair. Each classroom has a washing pot, a mirror and combs to remind the children to practice every day.

Lower secondary school students (aged 11 to 14), especially girls who are boarding, are given hygiene kits which include a face towel and small washing bowl, soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, combs and a mirror. Students are now more responsible when collecting rubbish and know where to dispose of waste as well as how to keep the boarding rooms clean.

### *Water supply systems*

In some schools in the remote mountainous areas, water has often been taken from upper streams using simple techniques, but the water supply system is not well maintained. As a result, the water is unsafe for drinking and cooking. Water flow is often interrupted during the dry season, causing hygiene problems for boarding students and teachers alike. During the school assessment process, teachers and parents conducted a survey of their school's water supply system to discover which parts needed to be repaired and how to maintain the system properly. Parents and teachers also help schools prepare for the new school year by cleaning school yards, repairing fences, and tidying gardens and classrooms. The fact that parents, teachers and members of the commune authority work together on these activities makes their relationships stronger and their responsibilities clearer.

### *Separate facilities for boys and girls*

Many schools do not have separate toilets for boys and girls, or for students and teachers, or there are not enough toilets for the number of students. Some schools have latrines but they are not well maintained and do not have water for cleaning. In the schools that took part in Oxfam's project, separate bathrooms and toilets with water containers were built for boys and girls, and students and teachers, and paths to the toilets and bathrooms were paved with cement.

## **Key outcomes**

The child-friendly schools model is now being rolled out to all 244 primary schools in Lao Cai, with the support of the provincial DOET and headteachers. They will mobilise more resources to enable more improvements to be made. Schools have attracted not only more students but also people from the wider community, as they have become an ideal venue for community events such as traditional cultural festivals.

Building separate toilets for boys and girls helped to improve hygiene in schools but also raised awareness of gender equality. In semi-boarding schools, girls and boys now have equal access to clean water and sanitation. This helps to improve girls' attendance at school. Three years after Oxfam's project in Lao Cai, the attendance rate for the province has increased from 87 per cent to 95 per cent, which has really inspired teachers to improve students' performance.

Teachers, local authorities and members of the community have worked together to organise extra-curricular activities like sports days and games. These have made the children feel more engaged and enthusiastic, with one child commenting that 'each day going to school is a joyful day'. As a result, the attendance rate remains fairly high. Extra-curricular activities also provide opportunities for children from ethnic minorities to meet and learn about each other. All interviews conducted by the evaluation team agree that students have become more active and confident<sup>9</sup>.

## **Monitoring, evaluation and lessons learned**

Oxfam and its project partners have conducted monitoring and evaluation through regular school visits to interview teachers, students and their parents. While we have not carried out a comprehensive evaluation on all aspects of this programme, data provided by our project partners indicates that the attendance rate of girls, particularly girls who are boarding in schools supported by the project, was maintained. This represents a huge success, as school drop-out rates were very serious. All female students who maintained attendance were reported as happy graduates from primary and lower secondary schools in the 2009–10 school year. Attendance rates are an indicator of improvements in the school environment.

Lessons identified and to inform future activities include the following:

- Promoting good hygiene practices requires not just students but also their parents and families to change their everyday habits. By working with project partners who have a deep understanding of local people's knowledge, behaviour and practices, it is hoped that any changes will be maintained in the longer term.
- Addressing gender issues in poor and indigenous communities also requires those involved to develop a thorough understanding of indigenous cultures. Though headteachers, district education managers and officials from commune authorities may be aware of the different needs of girl and boy students, the programme may also need to tackle the attitudes and prejudices of these key stakeholders so that they are ready to adopt new ideas to address these differences.
- Success is dependent on all those involved taking responsibility for mobilising resources to put the action plan into practice. The way that the programme worked in partnership with district and provincial authorities from the beginning has ensured real ownership of the process, and promotes accountability.

- Applying a participatory approach right from the start of the project cycle enables strong relationships to be built between schools and parents, and schools and the wider community. This process facilitated a higher level of engagement between the parents and schools, who are both seen as active participants in the development of their local community.
- Many teachers are 'outsiders' in their community, and because they are educated, they are regarded as 'different' or 'not like us'. Monitoring how the child-friendly school model impacts on this and whether it can help to break down barriers between teachers and parents, and others in the community is necessary.

<sup>1</sup> Government of Viet Nam (2006) *Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) 2006*, General Statistics Office of Viet Nam.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2009) 'Modern Institutions – Vietnam Development Report 2010', Joint Donor Report to the Vietnam consultative Group Meeting, Hanoi, 3–4 December 2009, <http://www.presscenter.org.vn/en/images/WBreport2010.pdf> (accessed 4 April 2011).

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO (2010) 'EFA (Education For All) Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the Marginalized', Paris: UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

<sup>4</sup> Government of Viet Nam (2008) *Household Living Standards Survey 2008*, General Statistics Office of Viet Nam.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO 2010, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Website of the Lao Cai Province People' Committee.

<http://laocai.gov.vn/sites/sovhttdl/lichsulaocai/lichsulaocai/Trang/634051425806650000.aspx> (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Lao Cai Provincial Department of Education and Training (2006) Annual Report to the Ministry of Education and Training.

<sup>8</sup> Lao Cai Provincial Department of Education and Training (2009) Annual Report to the Ministry of Education and Training.

<sup>9</sup> Aikman, Sheila; Tran, Long Thap and Ha, Nguyen Thu (2010) Report of the Evaluation of Oxfam GB Education Programme in Lao Cai, Vietnam 2007-2010, p. 16.

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