

‘No longer sitting quietly’

Building space for community participation in Vietnam



People in Da Trang village, Phuoc Tan commune choose appropriate communication tools with the help of an official from the district People's Committee. Photo: Oxfam GB

For most people in Vietnam, living conditions have steadily improved since the *doi moi* reforms began in 1986. But inequalities continue to widen, especially between people living in rural and urban areas, and between majority and minority ethnic groups. And local people, especially if they come from a minority group, still have little say in how their communities are run. Although in theory some national policies promote bottom-up planning and decision making, in practice there is a long way to go until this happens on the ground. This case study looks at a project that was part of Oxfam's Right to Be Heard programme. Based in Bac Ai district, it aimed to strengthen the participation of poor men and women from the Raglai ethnic minority in local government programmes and also to build skills among local government officials.

Introduction



The project worked in four communes in Bac Ai district and targeted the Raglai ethnic minority group, with a particular focus on women.

'When I came to Bac Ai five years ago local people rarely spoke out, and there were few community-based organizations. Now this has changed. I am happy about that.' – Truong Thu Huyen, Oxfam Programme Co-ordinator, Right to Be Heard programme, Vietnam¹

Vietnam has a population of around 87 million and is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The *doi moi*, or 'renovation', reform process, which began in 1986, saw the transition of the country from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one. Significant economic growth since then has been driven by agricultural reforms relating to land and prices, resulting in an improvement in living conditions for many people. Vietnam now ranks 128th out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index and is considered by the United Nations to be a 'medium human development' country.²

At the same time, however, inequality has increased, especially between those living in rural and urban areas, and between minority and majority ethnic groups. In rural areas, 18.7 per cent of people are living in poverty, compared with only 3.3 per cent in urban areas. And the country's 54 minority ethnic groups account for up to 50.3 per cent of all poor people, but make up only 14.3 per cent of the total population.³

‘If you don’t know, you don’t ask’ – moving from top down to bottom up?

‘The policies are there, but people don’t know about them so they don’t ask. And information from government sources is limited. There is a big gap between policy and information – but this provides space for people to demand participation.’ – Truong Thu Huyen, Oxfam Programme Co-ordinator, Right to be Heard programme

In Vietnam the National Assembly, the highest representative body of the people, is the only branch of the government with constitutional and legislative power. Legislation and government commitments strongly endorse social accountability, but decision making, development planning, and implementation are still highly centralized and top-down.

Some national policies in theory promote bottom-up planning and decision making, although in practice there is a long way to go until this happens on the ground. For example, the 2007 Grassroots Democracy Ordinance calls for extensive public involvement at the commune level in decisions relating to the use of public resources. According to the Ordinance, people have the right to be informed, to participate in discussions, and to make decisions on local socio-economic development activities, especially when these activities require community resources.

This work is supposed to be done through local bodies. Each province, district, and commune has a local legislative body called the People’s Council. The Council should appoint another set of local leaders with executive authority called the People’s Committee, which handles daily administration at provincial, city, district, and commune levels. But in practice, each level is highly dependent on the one above – for example, budgets are based on quotas provided from high-level offices. So, despite government legislation, there is a lack of local participation in policy processes.

This may be partly because civil society organizations (CSOs) are relatively new – they have only emerged in Vietnam in the past ten years. They still have limited awareness of policy processes and lack the confidence and skills to engage in policy debates or to involve communities.

It may also be because CSOs are seen by local authorities as a channel for the dissemination of information from government to local people instead of a mechanism for promoting two-way communication.

Conflicts of interest are also a problem, with individuals filling a number of overlapping roles. For example, the deputy head of the Education Department might also be on the People’s Council. This makes it impossible for local people to challenge anything relating to education.

There is also a lack of capacity and understanding on the part of local planners. For example, local officials might broadcast information on loudspeakers in villages – but only in Vietnamese, when local people only speak their own languages.

No longer sitting quietly: bridging political gaps

'Previously Raglai people used to sit quietly in meetings with local government and never attend any meetings with People's Council deputies. Now we are aware that we will not go to prison if we raise our concerns.' – Kato Chan, Maty village.

Oxfam has been working in Vietnam since 1990. The Right to be Heard programme was a response to people's concerns about growing inequality and vulnerability. It was hoped that it would enable the government to create more space for local participation in key development issues, plans, policies, and programmes, and to help minority groups and women find a voice. The programme also focused on building constructive dialogue between local officials and communities, particularly in terms of planning. It included strategies to strengthen local people's awareness on policies such as the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance, and constitutional and citizens' rights.⁴

This paper looks at a project that aimed to strengthen the participation of poor women and men of the Raglai ethnic minority group in government policies and programmes in Bac Ai district in Ninh Thuan province. The poverty rate for areas where many Raglai people live is high – for example, in Bac Ai in 2009 the poverty rate was 54 per cent, compared with 10 per cent for the whole of the province.⁵

The project worked in four communes: Phuoc Tan, Phuoc Tien, Phuoc Chinh, and Phuoc Thang. As well as targeting Raglai ethnic minority men and women, it had a particular focus on women's participation and leadership.

The programme was carried out in a number of stages between 2007 and 2010. First, Oxfam carried out an analysis of the social and power dynamic and status of community-based organizations (CBOs). This showed that they did not have the necessary skills to mobilize people's participation – for example, skills in communication, negotiation, or facilitation, or the ability to supervise implementation.

Next, it focused on raising awareness of local Raglai men and women on their rights and responsibilities, so that they could participate in plans and development issues at local level. The project did this in a number of ways, including:

- Small group discussions using pictures and practical examples;
- Theatre related to issues in the village, written and performed by villagers;
- Recorded tapes in the Raglai language;
- Live broadcasting in Raglai and Vietnamese through loudspeakers;
- Production and distribution of posters and leaflets;
- Training on participatory planning and other issues for members of CBOs and local commune authorities;
- Forming Village Development Boards and strengthening Community Investment Monitoring Boards;
- Training on the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance;

- Training on communication and facilitation skills, and policy analysis and monitoring, including monitoring of the construction of houses and toilets.

Maty was one village where a number of project activities were carried out, including the successful setting up of a Village Development Board (see Box 1).

Box 1: A golden chance: Maty Village Development Board

Maty is a village of 431 people in Phuoc Thang commune. Almost all the villagers come from the minority Raglai ethnic group. Prior to the project, villagers faced a number of problems such as infertile land, lack of knowledge about how to improve land quality, and high levels of alcohol consumption.

In March 2009, a core group of 11 influential people formed the Village Development Board. Oxfam gave them training and support. 'It was the first time members were exposed to project management. We learned about book-keeping and publicizing expenditure. We received financial support and frequent technical support and advice. It was a golden chance for us,' says Pinang Truyen, deputy head of the Maty Village Development Board.

The Board was then able to mobilize villagers to undertake a range of activities, including labour groups to work on improving land quality. They learned to use cattle manure to fertilize land, removed stones from rice paddies, and drained canals. As a result, rice paddy areas expanded and many households have more than doubled their yields.

The Board also mobilized voluntary contributions in both labour and money from village people to build a pathway over the irrigation canal. 'Sixty out of 99 households participated in the village meeting called by the Board. They unanimously agreed on the idea and we came up with a "people's resolution". Poor households who couldn't donate money would contribute their labour. We bought materials and constructed it ourselves. Knowledge from Oxfam's training course was applied when we selected materials,' recounts Chamale Sinh, head of the Village Development Board.

Villagers have also taken part in joint activities such as cleaning public areas, sports, and art activities. There are now men's and women's volleyball teams and an art group. Security and order in the village has improved. There have also been changes in terms of governance and management, project planning, and community-based advocacy. Villagers have begun to place their trust in the Board members and use them as representatives in monitoring and giving feedback to local government on service delivery. The process will take time, but these changes are a positive sign of how projects can be run involving local women and men.

The project also facilitated the formulation and operation of 12 CBOs to represent poor people in the different villages in three communes and to monitor government programmes. As the example in Box 2 shows, Community Investment Monitoring Groups were able to work with building contractors and the recipients of new houses to ensure that low-quality bricks were replaced and builders made to fix faults.

Box 2: The missing bags of cement: the role of Community Investment Monitoring Groups

Community Investment Monitoring Groups were set up in the four communes to monitor their housing programmes. The techniques were very simple, calculating the number of bricks and quantities of cement to ensure that the contractors did not skimp on the requirements.

'We were given training in monitoring techniques and skills such as how to check the quality of the cement, bricks, and concrete mixture,' says Trinh Xuan Truong, Vice-Chair of the Phuoc Tien Commune Fatherland Front, and team leader of the Group. 'We were also shown how to explain to villagers about the design and the materials and encourage them to take part with the builders so they could monitor the quality themselves. About 20 men and ten women were trained in this way.'

People like Pinăng Thi He and her husband, from Phuoc Tan, received support from the Group when building their house. They were given a print-out of the house design and explanations about how their house would be built, how much material was needed, a materials monitoring form to keep track of it, etc. They were encouraged by the Monitoring Group to help the builders as well as to check their work. 'We knew that our house needed 38 bags of cement but when they only brought 34, we told them to bring the missing bags,' says Pinăng Thi He.

Chamale The, 28, also from Phuoc Tan, nearly died when a beam fell on his head during the construction of his house. Lacking the confidence to raise his voice against the contractor, he sought help from the Group. 'I didn't think that the contractors would listen to me. They would argue that I am ignorant of construction work. I called the Group, who discovered frauds and persuaded the contractor to reinforce the beam,' he says.

Clear and tangible results: what worked well

'Participatory planning reform changed my mindset in planning work. I learned a lot of new, useful knowledge which helped leaders to gain a better overview. Local people better understand policies and their rights. The authorities have more exposure to local people and understand them better too.' – An officer from Bac Ai People's Committee⁶

The project achieved its aim of strengthening the participation of poor women and men in government policies and programmes. Local people and CBOs in Bac Ai became more active and participative and more knowledgeable about relevant laws and policies (e.g. the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance). As the project progressed, they also became more willing to co-operate and to engage in dialogue. Nearly 1,000 Raglai women and men participated in various communication activities. At least 70 per cent of those who participated said they felt that they had greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the community development process.⁷

Commune councils were strengthened and members learned new skills and acquired new knowledge. 'The project taught me facilitation skills, communication skills, monitoring and evaluation skills, and policy analysis. I was more confident in presenting ideas to local people and gained better understanding of policies. I was more articulate in my writing skills,' said one deputy on a Communal People's Council.

Increased awareness among local people put pressure on local government to open more space for community involvement in monitoring work as well as in planning processes.

The presence of women leaders potentially paved the way to raise gender awareness and to improve women's economic position and access to leadership roles among the Raglai people. 'There have been changes in the mindset. Previously it was thought that female deputies, even when elected, were not capable enough. Now they even nominate women into these positions,' said a People's Council deputy in Phuoc Tan commune.

These achievements were made possible because:

- The programme was in line with government policies;
- It was based on the province's local context of decentralization, social accountability, and participation in the planning and monitoring of policies;
- It focused on better co-ordination between provincial and district authorities – although this is an area where more work needs to be done;
- It mobilized people's participation in planning, which had a direct impact on their lives;
- Its approach to raising people's voices was relevant to local culture, promoted dialogue between local people and authorities, and strengthened the role of CBOs in supporting one other.⁸

Challenges: ‘governance is a tough job’

‘Governance is a very tough job and it takes a long time to see the impact. Sometimes we feel daunted, but if we look at this as a process we can really see the changes.’ – Truong Thu Huyen, Oxfam Programme Co-ordinator, Right to be Heard programme

While the policies are in place, it is still not easy for people, particularly poor people, ethnic minorities, and women, to participate in governance. This made the project’s work slow and difficult. Both local people and local leaders were often wary of trying new ways of doing things without getting approval from higher authorities.

For example, of the four Community Investment Monitoring Groups, two were very active and effective. The other two were not. This was for two main reasons: the capacity of group leaders and the commitment of group members. In the active groups, group leaders built up good credibility and trust both with local government and among local people, but in the less active groups this never happened.

Box 3: The failure of the Water Management Group

Overall the Water Management Group was not a success story. The Group collected monthly contributions to run the water system in the district. It was established and nurtured by local people, starting from their need to maintain government-sponsored water pipelines. But in the end, changes were minimal, due to the following factors:

- Weak leadership. Group members in each village collected money from people and disbursed it at their discretion. But leaders and deputy leaders did not have control over financial issues, and therefore had little respect from their teams.
- Few women were involved, even though they have a major responsibility for water.
- No awareness-raising activities for local people were carried out. The focus was mainly on maintaining the water pipelines.
- Because the water tanks were communal, people were anxious that they might be paying for water they had not used. Jealousy among the paid, non-paid, and late-paid led to an irresponsible attitude among water users.
- There was no transparency to users about financial management.

Work on governance with poor people is also difficult because their first priorities are food, clothes, and housing and they are unlikely to have the skills or indeed the time needed to work on advocacy.⁹ This was particularly true when working with the Raglai people, who have low levels of literacy.

Organizations themselves did not yet have the capacity to carry out some of the activities. For example, although small grants for promoting social accountability at grassroots level were available, few CBOs accessed them. To counter this, the work needs to be joined up: it must include strategy development, advocacy, and policy work, as well as capacity building and networking.

The project also had too short a timeline – a participatory approach takes time to establish and carry out. In addition, the planning process needs to start well in advance of the activities in order to ensure that local partners can learn new processes and understand and adopt new tools. Otherwise the commitment of

local stakeholders could be weakened and the sustainability of the project affected.

In addition, the project was not well documented. This made it difficult to evaluate or to communicate for advocacy work.

Finally, too many external projects burdened local partners. Having many Oxfam projects in one community also led to some confusion among local people in terms of who was responsible for which. Better co-ordination is needed.

Despite these challenges, some significant changes have taken place for the Raglai women and men in the four communes of Bac Ai. Local officials also have a better understanding of the governance process. This has been a direct result of the project, which has built on many years of work by Oxfam GB on local governance in Vietnam.

Notes

¹ All quotations from Truong Thu Huyen are from an interview with Nikki van der Gaag.

² UNDP (2011) Human Development Index, http://www.beta.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/2011_Global_HDR/English/HDR_2011_EN_Tables.pdf

³ Vietnam Government (2009) Population and Housing Census. http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=508&ItemID=9787

⁴ Tran Thap Long and Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh (2011) 'Promoting Social Accountability in Ninh Thuan Province', evaluation, March 2011.

⁵ Centre for Sustainable Development Policy Studies (CSDP) and associates (2011) 'Gendered Market Selection and Mapping for Economic Leadership Development of Raglai Women in Bac Ai and Thuan Bac District, Ninh Thuan Province'.

⁶ Tran Thap Long and Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh (2011), *op. cit.*

⁷ Affiliated Network for East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) (2010) 'A Study on Oxfam GB's Local-Level Government Experiences in East Asia', report commissioned by Oxfam GB's Regional Office for East Asia.

⁸ Tran Thap Long and Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh (2011) *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

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