

Sustainable Livelihood Development and Ethnic Minority Diversity in Lao Cai Province Effectiveness Review

Summary Report



**Oxfam GB
Livelihoods Outcome Indicator**

October, 2012

Acknowledgments:

We would like to thank the Oxfam Vietnam team for being so supportive during the exercise. Particular thanks to Dao Quang Minh, Thuy An and the Consultant Trương Hào Quang.

Photo: Nguyen Thi Hoang

Executive Summary

Under Oxfam Great Britain's (OGB) Global Performance Framework (GPF), sufficiently mature projects are being randomly selected each year and their effectiveness rigorously assessed. The Sustainable Livelihood Development and Ethnic Minority Diversity in Lao Cai Province project (RVNA64) was randomly selected for an Effectiveness Review under the livelihoods thematic area. This project was implemented from 2007 to 2011. Its focus was to mobilise poor, ethnic minority farmers, the H'mong, Dao, and Tay in particular, into farmer groups and provide them with training and agricultural extension support. The project also comprised of a number of policy influencing components, but this effectiveness review did not examine the effectiveness of this work.

Given that the bulk of the project's direct livelihood work was concentrated in Sapa district, data were only collected from the villages it targeted in this district. Here, the project established and supported 13 farmers groups, comprising of 271 households. Oxfam both directly supported the farmer groups and did so indirectly through the Sa Pa District Farmers' Union and the Department of Economic Development under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

To assess the effectiveness of the project, primarily in relation to improving agricultural production and household food security and income, a quasi-experimental impact evaluation design was implemented. This involved administering surveys to 553 households in 16 villages – 8 targeted by the project and 8 purposively matched comparison villages. To reduce bias, Propensity Score Matching (PSM) and Multivariable Regression (MVR) were used in the statistical comparison of the treatment groups. The effectiveness of the project in relation to a number of key outcomes was assessed through this process. These outcomes included those related to the adoption of preferred agricultural practices, service access and use, agricultural productivity and profits, household expenditure and wealth status, household food security and gender attitudes. The household expenditure data, in particular, informs Oxfam GB's global livelihoods outcome indicator:

- % of households demonstrating greater income, as measured by daily consumption expenditure per capita.

There is some evidence that the project succeeded in encouraging a small proportion of households belonging to its farmer groups to adopt a number of preferred agricultural practices, e.g. improved methods for rice seeding preparation and planting of both rice seedlings and maize seeds. These households were also more likely to report having better access to farming extension and, to a lesser extent, credit services. However, there is no evidence that this translated into improvements in agricultural production and/or profits and, in turn, either household food security or income. There is also no evidence that it improved gender attitudes in general and attitudes towards violence against women in particular.

While the findings of this effectiveness review are not positive, they do provide the basis for learning and critical reflection. Oxfam in general and the Vietnam country team and partners in particular are encouraged to consider the following:

- Present the findings of this review to relevant Oxfam staff/interns, district partners, and the farmer groups to further explore possible reasons why there is no evidence of project impact.
- Check to ensure that programmes and projects are designed to do more than simply support the roll-out of government plans and/or policy.
- Ensure that dietary diversification considerations are substantively mainstreamed in future food security projects in Sapa district and possibly elsewhere.
- Explore possibilities for adopting a more comprehensive value-chain approach to bolster both household income and food security.

Introduction and Purpose

Oxfam Great Britain (OGB) has put in place a Global Performance Framework (GPF) as part of its effort to better understand and communicate its effectiveness, as well as enhance learning across the organisation. As part of this framework, modest samples of sufficiently mature projects (e.g. those closing during a given financial year) are being randomly selected each year and rigorously evaluated. One key focus is on the extent they have promoted change in relation to relevant OGB global outcome indicators.

One of the projects randomly selected for the effectiveness review under the livelihoods thematic area in 2012/13 is entitled Sustainable Livelihood Development and Ethnic Minority Diversity in Lao Cai Province (RVNA64). This project was implemented from 2007 to 2011. Its focus was to mobilise poor ethnic minority farmers, the H'mong, Dao, and Tay in particular, into farmer's groups and provide them with training and agricultural extension support. According to project documents, this was intended to:

- Provide better access to and control over agricultural extension services, irrigation and market information that lead to empowerment and improvement in the lives of ethnic minority communities;
- Achieve equal opportunities for sustainable livelihood with respect to ethnic minority tradition, culture and local knowledge;
- Empower ethnic minority farmers to participate in decision making processes and raise their voices to positively impact their lives.

Given the bulk of the project's direct livelihood work was concentrated in Sapa district (see Figure 1), data were only collected from the villages it targeted in this district. Here, the project established and supported 13 farmers groups, comprising of 271 households. Oxfam both directly supported the farmer groups and did so indirectly through the Sa Pa district Farmer's Union and the Department of Economic Development under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.



Figure 1: District where data collection took place

Evaluation Approach

The Sustainable Livelihood Development and Ethnic Minority Diversity in Lao Cai Province Project, as implemented in Sapa District, attempted to improve the livelihoods of 271 ethnic minority rural households. From a rigorous impact evaluation perspective, the best way to evaluate such an intervention would have been to restrict the project's implementation to randomly selected geographical areas, leaving others sites for comparative purposes, i.e. as controls. This impact evaluation design is known as a clustered randomised control trial. If it was successfully implemented, the impact of the project could have been assessed by directly comparing the households of the intervention and control sites in relation to relevant measures of outcome. This is specifically because the randomisation process would have made the women and men in the two sites comparable in every way, save their participation in the project.

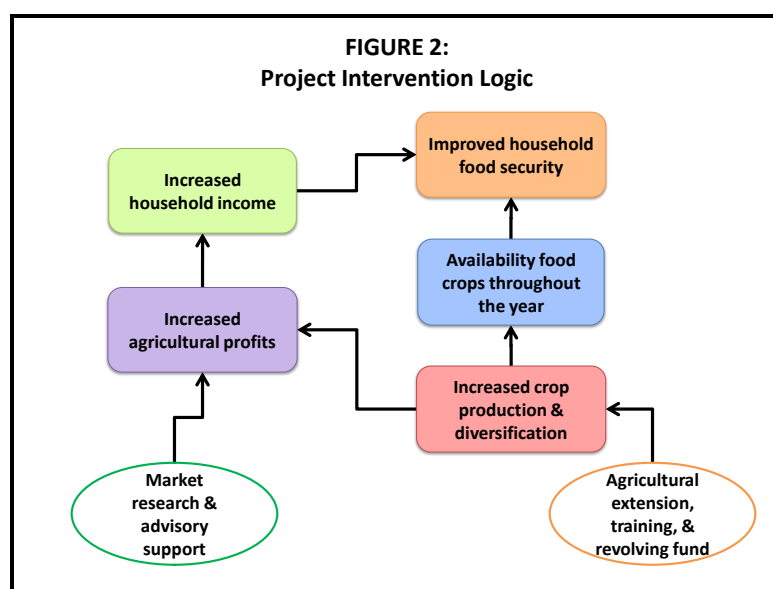
However, Oxfam and its district partners did not implement the project in randomly selected geographic areas; the villages were purposively chosen. An alternative impact assessment design was consequently pursued. This design is referred to as a quasi-experiment because it attempts to “mimic” what a randomised control trial does by purposively identifying a comparison group that is similar to the intervention group, and then statistically controlling for any measured differences between the two.

To implement the design, villages in Sapa district both where the project was implemented and not implemented were mapped out. The 8 villages where the project was implemented and 8 purposively matched comparison villages were selected for the data collection exercise. Data were collected from three groups of randomly selected households: Households belonging to the project's farmer groups ($n=140$), households that are not members of the farmer groups but from the same villages as the farmer groups ($n=142$), and households in the 8 comparison villages ($n=271$).

Intervention Logic of the Project

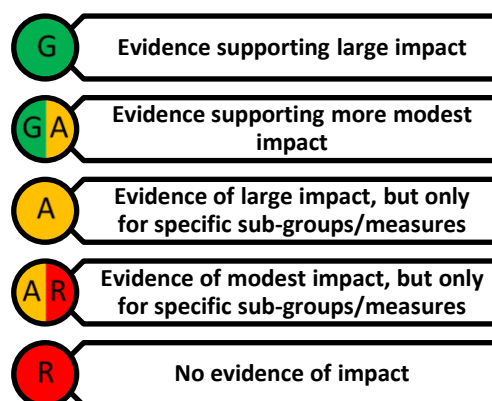
The primary aim of the project assessed under the Effectiveness Review was to improve household food security. Figure 2 presents the intervention logic of how the activities carried out under the project were to achieve this particular aim.

As is evident from the diagram, training and agricultural support was provided to both increase crop production and diversification. This was complemented through the setting up of a revolving fund to enable farmers to access credit for agricultural investment purposes. Increased crop production and diversification was to increase the availability of food throughout the year, thereby improving household food security. It was to also bolster agricultural profits and ultimately household income and, in turn, further contribute to improved household food security.



Impact Assessment Summary Table

The following summary table provides a snapshot of the key findings of the effectiveness review. A short narrative description related to each outcome then follows to unpack each key finding. A separate more technical report is also available that provides a more detailed and technical description of the evaluation design, process, and results. The table below summarises the extent to which there is evidence that the project realised its targeted outcomes in the form of a simple five-point 'traffic light' system. The key to the right presents what the various traffic lights represent.



Outcome/Impact	Rating	Short Commentary
Outcome 1 – Increased household income	R	No evidence of project impact in relation to Oxfam GB's global livelihoods indicator or other measures of household wealth/income.
Outcome 2 – Improved household food security	R	No evidence of positive impact on any of the household food security measures used. Intervention households actually worse off on the food diversity measure.
Outcome 3 – Increased agricultural production & profits	R	No evidence that the project increased production of rice, maize, or other crops or increased income through their sale.
Outcome 4 – Increased adoption of preferred agricultural practices	AR	Evidence that the project encouraged a small proportion of households in the farmer groups to adopt some promoted agricultural practices.
Outcome 5 – Improved access to services/information	AR	Farmer group households reported having better access to extension services and, to a lesser extent, disaster preparedness information but not other services.
Outcome 6 – Improved gender attitudes	R	No evidence that the project has improved gender attitudes in general and attitudes towards violence against women in particular.

Impact Assessment Findings

Outcome 1 – Increased household income

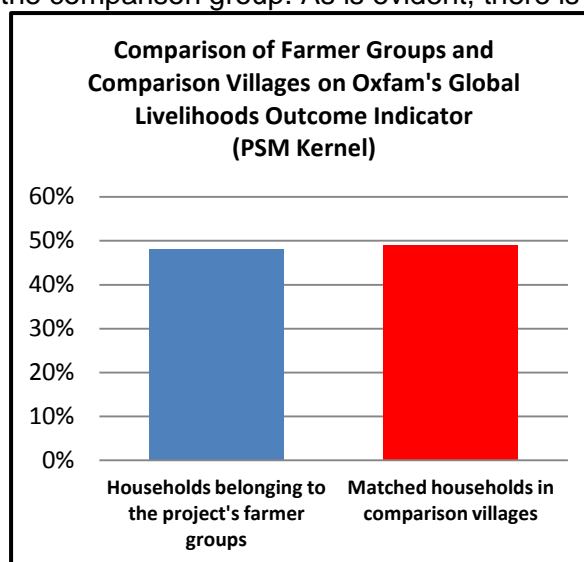


OGB's global livelihoods indicator is informed by consumption expenditure data, given that most of the people Oxfam and/or its partners support are not formally employed. During the survey, household respondents were asked to recall the types, quantities, and market value of various food items consumed during the previous week, as well as how much they spent on various non-food items.

The chart below displays the results of a comparison of the households belonging to the farmer groups established and supported by the project and the households in the comparison villages against OGB's global livelihood outcome indicator – % of households demonstrating greater income, as measured by daily consumption expenditure per capita.

Here, a household is considered to have greater consumption expenditure if it is above the typical household (as defined by the median) in the comparison group. As is evident, there is virtually no difference between the farmer group and comparison households, providing no evidence that the project has positively impacted household income. The same is true when all the households in the intervention villages are compared with the households of the comparison villages.

The results for the two other measures for household income reinforce this finding. No statistically significant difference, for instance, was identified between the groups for the household wealth index that was developed using 62 household assets and other wealth indicators. Nor is there any difference between the groups with respect to changes in their wealth status since the project's baseline period. Finally, all groups reported themselves to be at about the same level in terms of their ability to meet household needs.

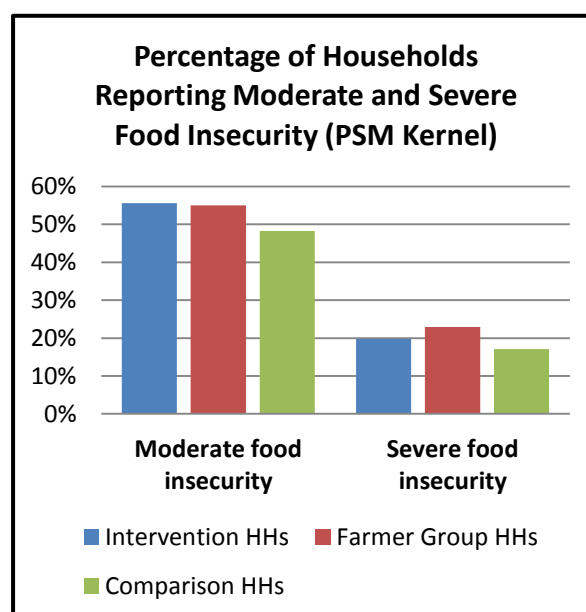


Outcome 2 – Improved household food security Data were also collected on two measures relating to household food security:

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- **The Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS)** developed by USAID's Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) Programme.¹ This scale involves asking the respondents six questions about various food security problems their household may have experienced during the previous four weeks, including the severity of these issues.
- **Number of times various food items were consumed by the household in the past seven days**, such as carbohydrate staples, fruits and vegetables, and various protein rich foods.

On both of these measures, no positive differences were found in favour of either the households in the intervention villages in general or the farmer group households in particular. The graph to the right, for example, presents the percentage of households who reported both moderate and severe food insecurity through HFIAS. The scores for the comparison households are actually lower than both the intervention and farmer group households, indicating that they are less food insecure. However, these differences are not statistically significant. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the second measure: While the diets of all three groups are poor in terms of diversity, the comparison households are better off – a difference which was found to be consistently statistically significant.



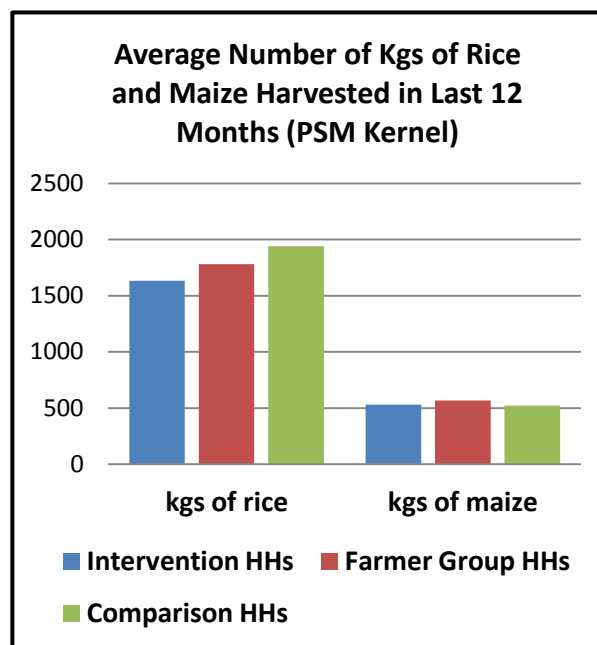
¹ http://www.fantaproject.org/publications/hfias_intro.shtml

Outcome 3 – Increased agricultural production & profits

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As mentioned above, the project sought to bring about improvement in household food security and income through bolstering agricultural production. Consequently, many of the questions in the survey were devoted to obtaining data related to agricultural production. The respondents, in particular, were asked to report on the various crops they cultivated during the previous 12 months, including the quantity harvested, their market value, production expenses incurred and revenue earned, if any. The households were also asked directly whether they had experienced an increase or decrease in agricultural production since the baseline period. If they reported in the affirmative, they were then asked to use stones to represent percentage of either increase or decrease.

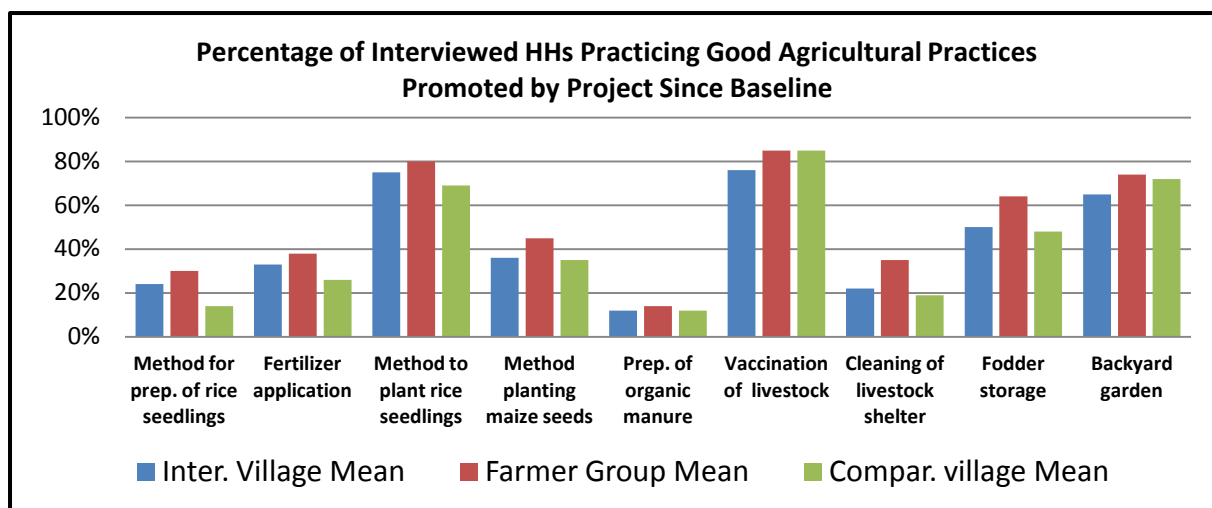
Unfortunately, again, there is no evidence – across all the measures – that the project was successful in bolstering agricultural production. The graph to right, for example, presents the average number of kilograms of rice and maize the household reported to have harvested during the previous 12 month period. While the average number of kilograms of rice is actually higher for the comparison households, the difference is not consistently statistically significant.

**Outcome 4 – Increased adoption of preferred agricultural practices**

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It is, of course, of interest to understand why there is no evidence that the project was successful in increasing agricultural production. Fortunately, the project attempted to do so by encouraging members of the farmer groups to adopt very specific agricultural practices. We can, therefore, explore the extent to which they reported practicing them vis-a-vis the other households in the intervention villages and those in the comparison villages. The specific practices promoted under the project to increase agricultural production included such things as improved techniques for preparing rice seedlings, planting of both rice and maize, and applying fertiliser. The interviewed respondents, in particular, were directly asked whether they had practiced each specific technique both before and following the project's baseline period.

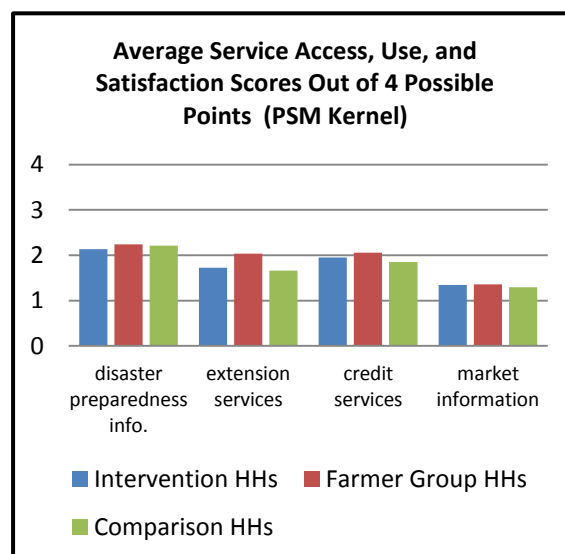
For several of these techniques, statistically significant differences in favour of the farmer groups were observed. These include those related to rice seedling preparation, rice and maize planting, and fodder storage. The results for the post-baseline period are presented in the graph below. While there are differences in favour of the farmer groups that are statistically significant, the graph also reveals that the magnitude of these differences is – practically speaking – not considerably significant. In other words, there are no dramatic differences between the three groups. Consequently, one plausible explanation why the project did not bolster agricultural production and, in turn, improve household food security is because it did not offer or generate anything uniquely different than that which took place in the comparison villages.



Outcome 5 – Improved access to services/ information



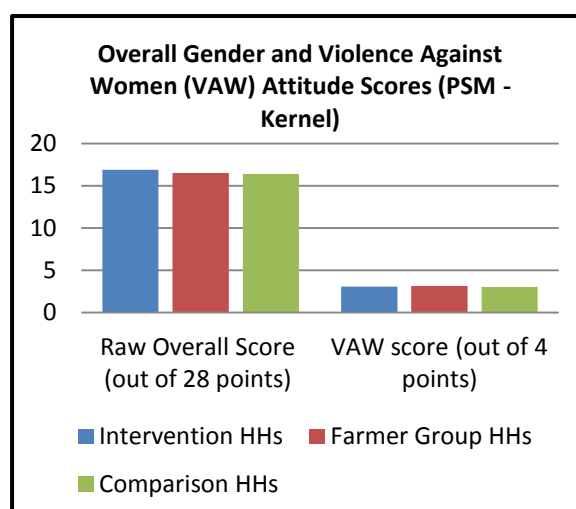
The respondents were also asked the extent to which they had access to four different types of services: disaster preparedness information, farming extension services, credit, and marketing information and support. If they reported having such access, they were then asked the extent they made use of the service and found it useful, as well as their perceptions on its timing and frequency. For each service, the households were then given a score out of four, with higher points awarded the more positively the respondent answered the various questions. As indicated in the graph to the right, the households belonging to the farmer groups were slightly more likely to report having better access to and use of extension services and, to a lesser extent, credit services.



Outcome 6 – Improved gender attitudes



One of the secondary aims of the project was to bring about positive gender impacts, particularly in reducing women’s subjection to violence. While it was deemed impractical to fully assess the effectiveness of the project in this respect, an attempt to measure gender attitudes was made. In particular, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with various statements pertaining to women’s position in the household and society, including one relating to the right for husbands to hit their wives. As revealed in the graph, no differences were found between the groups, either for the overall score or the specific statement relating to violence against women.



Programme Learning Considerations

While the findings of this effectiveness review are not positive, they do provide the basis for learning and critical reflection. Oxfam in general and the Vietnam country team and partners in particular are encouraged to consider the following:

- *Present the findings of this review to relevant Oxfam staff/interns, district partners, and the farmer groups to further explore possible reasons why there is no evidence of project impact.*

The quantitative methods used for the effectiveness review are good for assessing *whether* the project was successful in bringing about positive changes to the targeted households. However, there are limitations on how much they can reveal about how and why the desired changes did or did not happen. There are, nevertheless, some basic quantitative facts: While there is some evidence that the project was successful in encouraging the adoption of *some* preferred agricultural practices, it did not successfully bolster agricultural production and/profits. And this is the most likely reason why it failed to bring about improvements in household food security and income.

It would be useful, however, to explore more deeply why the project was unsuccessful in increasing agricultural production and/or profits. Was it because insufficient numbers of farmer group members, for example, adopted the promoted practices, such as those related to rice seedling preparation? Or: Was it simply because the project did not do anything uniquely different than what was simultaneously being promoted in other villages in Sapa district?

- *Check to ensure that programmes and projects are designed to do more than simply support the roll-out of government plans and/or policy.*

Upon review, it may be concluded that the effectiveness review found no evidence of impact because the project was, in effect, supporting the district government partner to implement its own plans. With the project's targeted villages covered, more of the district partners' time and resources may have been freed up to promote similar interventions in the district's other villages. Given that the project offered nothing uniquely different to the intervention villages in general and the farmer groups in particular, no evidence of impact was identified through the effectiveness review.

Impact is commonly defined as what people gained through a programme or project that they would not have otherwise gained if the programme or project never existed. One must wonder, then, what would have happened if the Sustainable Livelihood Development and Ethnic Minority Diversity in Lao Cai Province never existed? Would the farmer group households been significantly worse off? The available evidence suggests that they would not have been. And, if the intention of the project was to simply support the government implement its own plans, one must ask whether the district partners would have found a way to carry out these plans without Oxfam's support.

If Oxfam Vietnam desires to go beyond supporting the roll-out of government plans and/or policy, it is likely that more effort is needed in the project design phase. What, for example, is the nature of the problem the project seeks to address and what will it offer that will both effectively and uniquely do to address this problem, which can potentially be brought to scale by government in the future?

- *Ensure that dietary diversification considerations are substantively mainstreamed in future food security projects in Sapa district and possibly elsewhere.*

As mentioned above, the diets of the households in both the intervention and comparison villages are poor in terms of diversity. The project was attempting to address this in several ways, such as through the promotion of backyard gardening. However, there is no evidence that these attempts have been effective. Identifying effective interventions to change people's dietary behaviour is challenging. Nevertheless, it is recommended that both primary and secondary research be carried out for the purposes of developing, implementing and testing interventions to address this pertinent issue.

- *Explore possibilities for adopting a more comprehensive value chain approach to bolster both household income and food security.*

Only 10 per cent of the respondents from the farmer groups reported receipt of marketing advice since the baseline period. In addition, they scored an average of just 1.33 points out of 4 possible points on the market information service access measure. It is, therefore, clear that the marketing component of this project was minor and/or not substantively implemented. It may be possible to achieve greater impact on both household income and food security through the adoption of a more comprehensive value chain approach. This could be informed by an agri-business feasibility study that examines both the comparative production advantage of the supported farmers and market demand for the identified crops.