Oxfam Management response to the review of *Policy influence in Vietnam: Evaluation of Participatory Poverty Monitoring (Effectiveness Review Series 2013/14)*

Prepared by:	*Vu Thi Quynh Hoa- Advocacy and Campaign Manager*		
Contributors:	*Hoang Lan Huong- Advocacy and Communications Officer* *Tran Hong Diep- Advocacy and Communications Officer*		
Signed off by:	*Le Kim Dung, ACD*		
Date:	*29/10/2014*	**Country/Region/Campaign:**	*Vietnam/Asia*

1. The context and background of the review

As part of Oxfam Great Britain's (OGB) Global Performance Framework (GPF), samples of mature projects are randomly selected each year and their effectiveness rigorously assessed.   The 'Participatory Poverty Monitoring (PPM) project in Vietnam' was selected for review in this way under the policy influencing/citizen voice thematic area.

The project: *Participatory Poverty Monitoring (PPM) in Vietnam* was designed in 2006 with its first phase running in the period 2007-13 as a joint Oxfam GB and ActionAid Vietnam (AAV) initiative, funded by DFID. The main activity was to *conduct on-going, participatory monitoring of poverty in selected communities in either Oxfam or ActionAid project areas*. This was in response to a perceived need among NGOs to better understand and be able to regularly monitor effects of national policies at the grassroots level. During this phase, it focused on gathering qualitative information from sampled 'social monitoring checkpoints' in 10 rural communes in 9 provinces as well as in 3 urban sites.   It had a dual purpose of:

(i)   *conducting high quality participatory poverty monitoring* that could feed grassroots level feedback about poverty into national policy discussions about poverty reduction, and

(ii)   *building capacities of local stakeholders to use and apply* the skills learned and the information gathered.

In addition to this, the project aimed to provide a *solid evidence-base for Oxfam and AAV in the formulation of its campaigns and public outreach efforts* in the context of having access to *instant data* to feed into dialogue. At the time of the project design, this was seen as particularly relevant in relation to monitoring the effects on the poor after Vietnam's WTO accession, and in providing more qualitative inputs into national debates about poverty targeting. Thematic focus was on *poverty* (gaps between rich and poor), *vulnerability, gender relations* and *governance.*

The evaluation considered "*the extent and quality of participation in poverty monitoring"* and "*the credibility of findings"* alongside the effectiveness of intermediary outcomes in the re-created Theory of Change, which are:

(i)   People and their representatives engage in the PPM in a way that is genuinely reflecting their views and lead to policy recommendations and action at different levels,

OXFAM

(ii)   Members of Core Monitoring Teams are enabled to replicate methods and use information in their work, and

(iii)   Oxfam makes Technical Assistance available and makes strategic alliances (donors, government) to maximize use of PPM methods and findings.

(iv)   Policy makers are timely informed so that they can detect early signs of warning of changes in poverty outcomes for vulnerable groups;

(v)   Oxfam makes strategic alliances to use evidence to influence national policy agenda and decisions

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Findings:
Outcome area: *The project contributed to an increased level of participation in poverty monitoring, particularly focusing on vulnerable groups and emerging poverty issues.*

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
The process of involving wide range of government (and some non-governmental) actors in poverty monitoring widened their awareness and understanding of poverty issues and ways to monitor effects of poverty reduction interventions.	4	• The project made a significant contribution to the learning and widened understanding of poverty issues of the government officials and other local representatives that were directly involved in undertaking the participatory monitoring and in-depth poverty research. • Learning was largely personalised and processes were not invested in to institutionalise the learning.
Sampled individuals and households are increasingly heard in poverty monitoring as they articulate their own issues.	3	• Given that the AAV/Oxfam research is one of few alternative sources of poverty monitoring quoted alongside official poverty data by government agencies and donors, using contextualised and qualitative information, it is possible to conclude that research significantly helped raise a more diverse range of voices from the grassroots level in national poverty debates. • However, the participation could be made more meaningful by fine-tuning the approach to community involvement, and by putting findings to better use locally. Also, there should be a protocol to ensure that the process is empowering for participating individuals and that their anonymity is preserved.

OXFAM

Internal participation by Oxfam/AAV staff enabled findings to feed into wider learning, to be put to use internally and in collaboration with other NGO actors for programming and campaigning	2	• 'Ownership' of the technical tools and research methods has remained largely with the external consultancy firm contracted to provide TA and methodological inputs, with efforts being coordinated by a relatively small internal staff team at Oxfam at the time of the evaluation. • Although there seemed to be some fruitful collaboration and information sharing in between this project and other Oxfam/AAV programmes in selected sample sites, there was little evidence to suggest closer links to other programming or campaigning efforts led by Oxfam, AAV or other INGOs. • Limited participation and collaboration with broader civil society, using the comparative strengths of others for site selection or expertise on specific policy areas. • The project started off as a joint initiative between Oxfam and AAV. However, at the time of the evaluation this collaboration had ended, with Oxfam taking on follow-up phase on its own.

Outcome area: **The project produces credible findings, using rigorous and sound methodologies**

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
There is a perceived credibility of research findings among targeted user groups (primarily stakeholders at national level and the international community)	5	• There is an undisputed high level of perceived credibility of research findings among target groups such as national government stakeholders and the international donor community. • The credibility stems from the rigour of the research, but also largely from Oxfam's reputation and track record in supporting poverty reduction in Vietnam. Oxfam is expected to highlight issues in 'pockets of poverty' with a focus on the most vulnerable.
Perceived credibility is well supported by solid methods of implementation in conducting and quality assuring the monitoring process on the ground.	4	• Solid methods of implementation exist and are well documented in a detailed guide on how to conduct the research. • Some aspects of how the process is conducted could be more critically reviewed to ensure ethical consideration related to data coding, such as ensuring anonymity of participants in the research. Language and cultural barriers during the data gathering process also need to be looked at to ensure that the best qualified and culturally acceptable and gender sensitive approaches are being used during in-depth interviews and in conducting household questionnaires. • Limitations and potential biases in the data gathered should be more clearly accounted for up front in publications.

OXFAM

Outcome area: _Members of Core Monitoring Teams are enabled to replicate methods and use information in their work_

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
Core monitoring team members have used the skills and knowledge acquired as part of participating in this process in their regular work.	3	• There are examples of core monitoring team members having used new skills and knowledge acquired to improve their own work performance. • Knowledge on issues pertaining to individual cases was sometimes addressed (corrective learning rather than questioning and informing underlying principles and policies). • There are too few opportunities to practice new skills on conducting participatory research since this is not usually done by their respective departments or organisations, and is still seen as something done in parallel "for Oxfam / AAV".
Core monitoring teams have gained the ability to develop replicable participatory poverty monitoring methods and models.	4	• There is increased ability and interest in conducing more regular poverty monitoring in some of the sampled provinces, using more standardized and quantitative methods. • Although the intervention has significantly contributed to skills building on research methods, none of the core monitoring teams sampled for the evaluation were able to themselves drive the process without outside support and technical coaching. • Without more tailored follow-up in the provinces it is questionable whether the PPM intervention alone will make any significant contribution towards localised poverty monitoring since systems and methods were not institutionalised or gradually transferred over to partners. • The methods applied, though rigorous in nature, were perceived by partners at provincial government level to be too labour and time intensive for the sample size it was able to cover (which was too small for local planning purposes).

OXFAM

Outcome area: Dissemination of research leads to uptake of findings among relevant actors with an ability to influence policy making and implementation

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
Dissemination of research leads to extensive use of findings among target groups at national and provincial levels leading to the uptake of findings and ideas in national policy discussions and decisions.	4	• Oxfam has successfully made alliances with national policy relevant actors such as the National Poverty Reduction Office at MoLISA, and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) in charge of feeding evidence into government planning. • The dissemination strategy has largely focused on Consultative Group meetings where development partners meet with representatives from the government of Vietnam. This has been an effective platform for promoting the PPM research, get media coverage of issues, and to consolidate Oxfam/AAV's role in evidence-based poverty monitoring from a grassroots perspective. It has been used to present research findings to underpin INGO statements and for launching new published reports. • Officials at provincial level have been less successfully targeted with research information and information would need to be 're-packaged and timed more to their own planning processes and information needs to have an effect. • With the new format for the CG meeting, increased regular collaboration with VNGOs as well as INGOs on policy issues and how they can be underpinned by poverty monitoring data would be needed.

Outcome area: The project has created a sustainable network fore early detection of issues via Core Monitoring Teams and 'social monitoring checkpoints' with a diverse geographical spread

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
The project has created a sustainable network for early detection of issues via the 'social checking points' (core monitoring teams).	4	• The network has worked effectively to identify emerging issues as a result of PPM and to undertake the planned in-depth reports annually. • Some of the issues investigated in the in-depth research (using a somewhat different base for selective sampling) have been used to set the agenda for VASS in their annual reporting to top leaders. • This result area relates to the production of in-depth research reports (1 or 2 annually). These are often linked to upcoming policy areas of interest following the annual PPM rounds, and it cannot be argued emerge from a flexible system of early detection.

www.oxfam.org.uk/effectiveness

Outcome area: The project has been able to influence national policy discussions and decisions

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
The project has been strategically positioned in relation to national policy influence	5	• The project is the only NGO-led initiative quoted as a reference point for alternative, broad-based poverty monitoring aiming to present a national picture and poverty trends. • It successfully draws on Oxfam/AAV's wide representation in the country. • The project successfully taps into a need among policy makers for better understanding the context in a rapidly changing poverty landscape in Vietnam. Inequality, rather than broad-based monitoring will however be more in focus in the future.
Uptake of research by national actors indicate some indirect influence on policy discussions and decisions	4	• There are several examples of research findings being used to come up with policy recommendations or decisions, e.g. in relation to the urban poor and the near-poor. This has led Oxfam to be directly approached by institutions like VASS and MoLISA in collaborations for in-depth research. Influence was more noticeable in areas where relations were insitutionalised, and where Oxfam more actively has engaged in joint research or in co-funding workshops. Other national government agencies like the Committee on Ethnic Minorities and the National Assembly acknowledged the potential usefulness of research but with less clear examples of concrete use. • The usefulness of the Oxfam/AAV research as an alternative source of information was confirmed by a couple of consultants and independent researchers, though for more comprehensive data sets and in-depth studies on e.g. the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty monitoring, the UN agencies and in particularly UNDP and the World Bank are quoted as main sources. • The research was seen comparable with research and participatory processes conducted under the Sida-funded Chia Se funded programme, but unique for NGOs to independently conduct and promote.
PPM findings have been used by donor agencies to inform their strategies and positions	4	• There are examples of international development agencies/donors making reference to the Oxfam/AAV reports among those who have been funding or are interested in funding the initiative in the future. • There are examples of in-depth research being quoted by the World Bank in its in-depth poverty assessments. • Funding agencies confirmed that the information has been

OXFAM

		used in donor working groups and referenced as a useful resource.
		• The types of examples being quoted often come from in-depth research reports. Other NGOs could (and may also have) produced such reports, but the Oxfam/AAV work is well known since it is regularly being presented at CG meetings.
		• To avoid this type of monitoring and research to be seen as "owned by" or representing one or a few donors and NGO views only, a broader involvement of several funding agencies would be desirable and making better use of other funded mechanisms to feed into advocacy, such as NGO/CSO advocacy platforms on specific thematic areas.

Scoring key: Specific contribution of intervention

5	Outcome realised in full Evidence that intervention made a crucial contribution
4	Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made a crucial contribution Outcome realised in full & evidence that intervention made an important contribution
3	Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made an important contribution
2	Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made some contribution Outcome realised to a small degree & evidence that intervention made an important contribution
1	Outcome realised, to any degree, but no evidence that the intervention made any contribution

Recommendations:

The project has been driving a parallel two-track approach at provincial and national levels which may be considered as overly ambitious for a project of this relatively small size. Consider links and synergies with ongoing programmes at provincial level aimed at strengthening evidence-based planning (by Oxfam or other NGOs) that would need to be established to properly follow up on the integration, adaptation and use of methods and findings at provincial, district and local levels.

Explore how a more inclusive process with other INGOs and VNGOs could be conducted on key PPM/in-depth report findings.

An *omitted stakeholder group* in the current project design is other INGOs/CSOs who have mostly 'been informed' about the research once it has been published. A more inclusive process would respond to the government's desire to be presented with more 'peer reviewed and tested' proposals for ways forward *in addition to* evidence illustrating the problem and underlying factors, and because Oxfam holds important space in terms of engaging in evidence-based advocacy and dialogue on poverty issues.

OXFAM

<u>Devise a strategy for maximising data use and review establishment and training of core monitoring teams in the Vietnamese governance system</u>

So far, emphasis has been largely on the *production of high quality research* and less on processes of communication and socialisation of data, involving a more flexible range of partners in data interpretation and use at different levels. While there is a need to ensure the rigour and 'independence' of the research is maintained and improved, a strategy for maximizing use should be drawn up for the next phase. Whereas the provincial research networks have been established and trained in the form of core monitoring teams, their composition, size and exact mandate in the Vietnamese governance system (with the need for official recognition from relevant government bodies) should be reviewed.

<u>Consider research formats for future phases so information from the PPM process and research is used to set agendas, rather than be used to underpin and exemplify issues.</u>

In terms of framing of the research, the rigour of the research enabled what was 'already known' to be taken more seriously by other actors. In this context, one could also question the format for future phases. An alternative may be to conduct more labour and cost-intensive PPM rounds e.g. every three years, with more targeted poverty reduction research linked to ongoing national processes being done in between. This would free up time and space for more policy-oriented research. For such research to take place, it would be important to work more with other civil society actors and coalitions to ensure relevant grassroots outreach and sampling.

<u>Consider how the next phase of the project will engage more effectively with other networks of INGOs and VNGOs for strategic access to partners on the ground and to amplify the civil society voice in policy processes since the collaboration with AAV will not continue.</u>

The work is now closely associated with Oxfam by users from the donor and policy-making area. This puts Oxfam in a strong position to take on the role of providing alternative civil society-led poverty monitoring and to develop it into a future phase.

<u>In future, improve data coding to ensure anonymity of respondents and minimize reporting bias. Sample sites may also be regularly be reviewed to include the poorest pockets in the sample area. Critical analysis of potential biases and limitations should also consistently be included in the published reports.</u>

Given that Oxfam/AAV research is referred to both by national policy-makers and donors *particularly* to highlight issues around gender discrimination, ethnicity and other forms of vulnerability affecting emerging poverty patterns, it is important that data is recorded in a way that allows for a truthful representation of reality in these sensitive areas.

<u>Define a clear and commonly understood definition of the term 'participatory' related to the participatory monitoring process. This should also address how and to what extent households and communities are expected to participate and be empowered through actionable follow-up on findings.</u>

Lobbying, not just around key findings and emerging issues arising, but also on *how the evidence-base for grassroots democracy is integrated into planning* is something the project, in collaboration with provincial partners and core monitoring team members could consider focusing more on in the next phase, possibly in collaboration with other INGOs/VNGOs actively working on community-based and participatory models in the sample provinces.

3. **Overall do the findings of the review concur with you own expectations or assessment of the project's effectiveness?**

This external evaluation happened when the country team just completed an internal assessment at the closure of the 1st phase. This was to capture key lessons learnt as well as to consult with key stakeholders about the development of the 2nd phase. We had expected that this external review would provide us not only an independent review but also some insights on selected areas that we could take into account when developing the concept note and full proposal for the 2nd phase.

After a long process, with lots of back and forth discussion and arguments with external consultant about methodologies and findings, we think that this external review met (more or less) our expectations as highlighted bellows:

- Identify achievements and lessons learnt. Some of the lessons have been taken into account when developing full proposal for 2nd phase which was finally approved by Irish Aid and Swiss Development Cooperation for the period of 2014-2016.

- Able to track evidence which sometimes difficult to track with this type of policy research and advocacy project.

- Identify areas of improvement and propose recommendations to maximize project effectiveness. Some suggestions are practical and feasible to take forwards to 2nd phase.

4. **Did the review identify areas that were particularly strong in the project?**

Yes, some outcome areas such as: credibility of research findings among targeted user groups (primarily stakeholders at national level and the international community; create sustainable network for early detection of issues; and most importantly the project has been able to influence national policy discussions and decisions – the focus of our investment.

5. **Did the review identify areas that were particularly weak in the project?**

Yes, some areas such as: organizational research capacity (technical research skills) to complement organizational capacity in managing quality research and convening roles; ambitious with parallel objectives and better development of TOC as well as influencing strategy from project design.

OXFAM

6. **Summary of review quality assessment**

Overall the quality of this review is good in terms of: clear TOR development; two way communications, smooth coordination between global and national team, enhanced learning process, quality assessment report and useful follow up support from global team to (re) construct TOC for the 2nd phase when country team was developing full proposal submitted to donors.

7. **Main Oxfam follow-up actions**

Almost all the recommendations have been taken into account when designing and during the implementation of the 2nd phase. Concrete actions were agreed by country team and listed down for the post- review purpose. In particular, with a credible research process established, the project has been able to shift its focus to strategically disseminating research findings in order to influence/setting the agenda and supporting some selected provinces in devising a follow up action plan. In the second phase, improved data coding will ensure anonymity of respondents and minimise reporting bias, and critical analysis of potential biases and limitations are now more consistently included in the published reports. Finally, the team has been exploring opportunities with other NGOs to make research processes more inclusive.

8. **Any conclusions/recommendations Oxfam does not agree with or will not act upon**

There are few comments and conclusions country team do not agree such as:

- Outcome area 1: Regarding the comment on 'putting findings to better use locally': We agree that we should find more ways to maximise the findings to use locally, and will do so in the 2nd phase including looking at how we could support follow up initiatives at local level. At the same time, we don't agree with the statement that we could do much more to influence local level policy making given the timeframe and resource available for phase 1. The intended methodology we used was sound and fit for the purpose of influencing national level policy making (e.g. sample size, representativeness etc.), but not enough to make sound analysis and recommendations for the local level (e.g. sample size was too small). Furthermore, consistent follow up and support for local level was the responsibility of both organisations (Oxfam and ActionAid) which we could only take control in provinces where we are in charge.

- Outcome area 1: Regarding the comment on 'internal participation by Oxfam/AAV staff': we agree partly about the ownership of the technical tools. Yes, the consultant was hired to develop research methodologies but this did not mean that the ownership belonged to them. This was organizational decision at that time to have staff focusing on research management and coordination, networking and advocacy. We already had a plan to beef up organisational research capacity to enable Oxfam to be better at policy analysis among other things, and more effective at influencing. At the time of writing our feedback, we have recruited a policy research specialist.

- Outcome area 1: Regarding the comment on 'less evidences about this research findings fitting to wider Oxfam campaign': We don't agree. This work has very much delivered our national influencing agenda and objective, which is the 1st and foremost priority, and in fact

OXFAM

> very much in line with the WIN direction. Some concrete examples of findings from Vietnam were fed to global and regional work: findings on impact of economics crisis were fed to global papers including Oxfam, WB and DFAT; findings from initial inequality analysis were fed to regional and global discussion and planning for long term inequality campaign. We have linked with Oxfam's research team in Oxford throughout the process. The global team should make more attempt to link better to country teams for mutual benefits.

9. **What learning from the review will you apply to relevant or new projects in the future? How can the regional centre/Oxford support these plans?**

- It will be more effective and useful if this external evaluation could be planned better to fit the project closure. This is to avoid overlapping of project assessment. We suggest to include this to be one of project selection criteria for effective review.

- Better to discuss and agree the assessment methodologies with consultant before country fieldwork to have common understanding about what and how. This is to better manage consultant quality.

- Clearer TOC development from the beginning of assessment and from new project design would be really useful to both project implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

- Development of MEAL plan and regularly document evidence would strongly serve the monitoring purpose and track project effectiveness.

- Combination of international and national consultants would be a good option to complement methodology; country specific/context and language translation.

- The global/regional team can play a critical role in facilitating this assessment process; supporting country team for the follow up action; and managing the quality of external consultants.

10. **Additional reflections** that have emerged from the review process but were not the subject of the evaluation.

We found the rating by giving mark (1,2,3,4,5) to this policy research and advocacy project difficult and might not reflect both pros and cons even within a complementary. We suggest to find alternative option which might better reflect (such as the 'traffic light' proposed by the external consultant).

OXFAM