

# EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC REGION

## Social Development Notes

*INNOVATIONS, LESSONS, AND BEST PRACTICE*

### Pathways to Development

*Empowering local women to build a more equitable future in Vietnam*

#### Strategic Context

Vietnam's economic emergence is perhaps best experienced along its rural roads: over 175,000 km of pavement, rubble and dirt track extend to two-thirds of the country's population and nearly all of the poorest people, who live among its productive farms, lush forests and meandering river valleys.

In recent years, road investments in Vietnam's rural areas have improved socio-economic development and have promoted gender equity, social participation, improved school attendance and more inclusive health services to impoverished regions. All but a few hundred communes remain off grid. Yet infrastructural roadblocks and bureaucratic potholes have delayed the goal of a fully integrated road system. Connecting everyone through better maintained road networks will pave the way to a smoother future.

The World Bank's Third Rural Transport Project (RTP3) identified missing links that left many rural Vietnamese communities off the map from the country's remarkable development successes. The project prioritized road maintenance and local infrastructure management above new construction projects, and collaborated with the government institutions to address steep increases in travel costs per kilometer across crumbling rural roads. Project staff identified barriers along the route to more accessible road networks, including a lack of incentives to local bureaucracies to regularly maintain rural roads in remote areas. This situation has led to deteriorating roads in places that are desperate for improved access to goods, services and social networks.

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*The Third Rural Transport Project supported ethnic minority women to sustainably manage road maintenance through an innovative participatory approach to local development.*

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GAP funded



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### Third Rural Transport Program: Objective

“This program directly contributes to the poverty reduction and economic growth objectives set out in the 2002 Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS), and the Government’s last 5 year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) 2001-2005. It is also consistent with the draft SEDP for 2006-2010 which states the priorities of the rural transport sector to be: the completion of basic access; the upgrading of access quality and an increase in maintenance budgets. The program will continue the task of completing access to all communes in Vietnam and as such will contribute directly to the Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) objective of ensuring equitable growth in Vietnam.

The project also recognizes that the nature of the rural transport sector is shifting from new construction to upgrading, maintenance and management of the network. The focus on governance of the sector—in particular the role of the decentralized provincial governments, is a reflection of this shift. Work to support Provincial planning and implementation capacity will directly contribute to the CAS objective of governance and administrative reform in Vietnam.”

### A Path to More Inclusive Development?

The Project team discovered that **Government support, adequate financing and community participation** are among the most critical components for success. Local interest in overseeing road maintenance is necessary, but not sufficient, to ensuring lasting transportation links from urban to rural areas. It is also important to have support from governmental institutions, such as the Provincial Department of Finance, to effectively administer road maintenance. Inadequate finance remains a challenge: The department’s funds account for less than five percent of the total provincial expenditure on roads, which is insufficient for covering the entire road network.

As a result, the Government’s infrastructure strategy has often been directed to major highways and trans-shipment routes at the expense of rural roads. These policy issues must be addressed



Construction crew upgrading the road between Lai Chau and Lao Cai towns, northern Vietnam, Photographer: Tran Thi Hoa, 2002.

before an integrated rural transport system can move ahead.

Presently, the rural roads network is largely managed by Vietnam’s provincial Districts and Communes; they receive a small allocation from the provincial budget which is often supplemented through district and commune revenue generation. Commune arranged “labor days” are an intermediary way to ensure that byways are marginally open to traffic. This is a pretty novel solution to inadequate maintenance, but clearly more can be done.

### Impediments to Road Maintenance

The RTP3 task team analyzed how local socio-economic conditions and the excessive costs of maintaining roads in mountainous areas places additional burdens on people living in remote areas. Their investigation showed that up to a third of the population in the Northern Uplands provinces would be expected to contribute up to ten percent of their total annual household expenditure to ensure safe passage along local roads; this is too much for most to afford. Compounding these challenges, when adequate resources are made available for maintenance, contractors have sometimes been unwilling to work in inaccessible regions, due to fears of mudslides during the rainy season.

### Women Volunteer to Help

The situation appeared intractable; the political-economic realities insurmountable. Project team members realized a solution was at hand: women from communities along rural roads. In speaking with people across Vietnam, the project team discovered that many women from ethnic minority communities expressed interest in volunteering and actively participating as stewards of their local roads. The World Bank’s task team soon promoted the idea of having ethnic women work as road maintenance crews. Con-

sequently the Bank sent out calls for proposals under the Gender Action Plan to address “Just in Time” gender gaps to effective, inclusive development.

The team secured funds to pilot an initiative across four communes in Bach Ha District in Lao Cai Province. The project sought to: (i) increase awareness of the need for rural roads maintenance among the ethnic groups; (ii) promote a sustainable road maintenance culture within the community; and (iii) improve the local livelihoods by providing additional off-season jobs for the ethnic minority women in Vietnam.

*Establishing a Framework for Inclusive Road Maintenance: Empowering Women Volunteers*

A novel Rural Transport Project soon began to take shape. A pilot effort trained local ethnic minority women in engineering and road building practices, and provided formal employment opportunities for those tasked with responsibility for specific sections near their communities. The Lao Cai Provincial Women Union (PWU) acted as a key implementing agency for the project, given its deep roots in the community and solid reputation at the District, commune and village levels. The Women’s Union managed and monitored the recruitment of women in Ban Lien, Nam Mon, Nam Tri, and Hoang Thu Pho villages, and provided them with training and equipment.

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*“Women like to do this work; they are competing to join. They think that maintaining the road makes the roads nicer, and more convenient for transporting commodities to develop the household economy. During this time of the year, it often rains so maintaining the roads during this time is good.”*

— PHUNG PHA SUI,  
an ethnic woman trainee

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## Learning by Doing

Staff from the provincial Department of Transport (PDOT) spearheaded the critically important road maintenance training programs. An innovative training program utilized a number of resources, including handbooks and on-site experiential modules to build capacity for their new employees.

The course followed a demand-driven approach built upon the willingness and commitment of ethnic minority women to be guardians of their local community’s transportation networks. Representatives from a wide range of organizations and institutions participated in the training:

- Office of Urban and Infrastructure Management
- District Women’s Union
- Provincial Women’s Union
- Project Steering committees from each of four communes (commune leaders, chairwomen of women union, cadastral staff)
- Village heads village sub-women union, deputy village heads; and traditional leaders

The training program presented opportunities and challenges to successful culture of road maintenance. An important challenge was language: Vietnam’s richly diverse linguistic tapestry often kept prevented effective communication. Many, if not most, rural women did not speak the Vietnamese language. The Women’s Union co-operated with Transportation Department to provide training combined with on-the-job practice to rural women whose previous work experience was mainly related to shifting cultivation and swidden agriculture. Besides providing an overview of the project’s goals and approaches, hands-on engagement provided an effective way to transfer knowledge.

## Result

A total of 1,533 ethnic minority women from four communes were trained as rural transportation managers; many more eagerly await the opportunity. Following the training courses, women became road maintenance workers for the PWU, and paid a salary of about 100,000 Vietnamese Dong (VND) a day per person for each section of the road completed. In order to ensure high-quality work, the district Office of Urban and Infrastructure Management within Bac Ha district supervised and monitored work along the road sections, assisted by community supervisors and technical guidance from PDOT staff.

Across the road networks, between ten and thirty women are responsible for maintaining a one to two kilometer section for three months. Each person who participates in daily maintenance is

## A Woman's Day on the Job

*Mission Diary – Tour of Rural Road Innovations in Vietnam  
Submitted by Peter O' Neill  
Thu, 2010-04-22*

“At 7:00a.m., I am eating, with my team, a tasty breakfast—Pho, a Vietnamese noodle soup. The World Bank team is ably led by our TTL, Phuong Thi Minh Tran, who having been on the sleeper many times before, wisely turned in the earliest of us. We are assisted by Sombath Southivong, the Senior Transport Specialist from the WB office in Laos, who brings with him the Laos innovation and experience. Breakfast finished, we leave to meet with the provincial transport department to learn more about their innovative program, hiring women's groups to manage and maintain select road lengths.

The Provincial Department of Transport, Lao Cai Women's Union, DFID and the World Bank are working together on introducing innovation for rural road provision and maintenance to lower the cost of supplying increasing demand. The women have formed a group to undertake the routine maintenance tasks in keeping roads and tracks in good condition, and the trial is about to be extended to other provinces. Key to success factors has been the training received on good maintenance practice and receiving supplies of maintenance material.

In no time it is 7 p.m., and we return to the station, exchanging each other's learning experiences, talking about the day's events, the field visits and the transport department's meetings in those reinforced concrete buildings that always take on a sense of anonymity. . . We will put it into practice tomorrow at our next regional transport department meeting.”

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*“Dig soil . . . Take out the grass . . . Trim the bushes . . . Clear sewers . . . [this] is a new job for us who previously only knew how to cultivate. Although we are sometimes tired, the work is more satisfying than working in the fields alone. After maintenance, the road will be much safer for villagers heading to the market, and more convenient for teachers going to schools.”*

— an ethnic female road worker

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guaranteed VND 100,000. A typical timeframe for maintenance includes five to ten days per month of active work, depending on the maintenance workload and requirements for different road sections.

Beginning at sunrise, women from Hmong, Tay and Dao ethnic communities walk ten kilometers by foot carrying shovels and hoes to their workplace—for many the first formal employment opportunity of their lives. They work all day clearing debris, repairing broken sections, filling potholes, grading the surface and designing irrigation canals. Together, they share the work—enlivened with stories and a common bond.

Approximately 51 kilometers of roads were maintained under the pilot initiative, covering:

Nam Mon commune	Nam Mon – Coc Ly roadlink: 17 km
Nam Det commune	Nam Tri – Nam Det roadlink: 11km
Hoang Thu Pho commune	Ban Pho – Hoang Thu Pho roadlink: 8.5km
Ban Lien commune	Road leading to Ban Lien: 14.5km

## Solidifying Benefits from Road Maintenance

The World Bank's rural roads maintenance pilot project has achieved significant development successes, including, and while promoting and improving for their families. Stakeholder consultations undertaken by the task team have also identified several **specific advantages** relating to the initiative:

- Road maintenance is more efficiently managed by local people, who have clear incentives to promote quality and limit corruption; Project funds provide direct benefits to communities and rural women rather than be spent on leisure activities, including alcohol consumption or gambling.
- Improved awareness of the critical importance of road maintenance among local communities creates trust and account-

ability across villages and builds cooperative capacity;

- Women have achieved greater voice in community decision-making and a more visible role in managing affairs at the household level, arising from increased economic power and social status.
- Participation of women in road maintenance contributes to enhanced social cohesion among members of local women’s unions and neighborhoods, which in turn strengthens mutual cooperation, and social capital endowments in rural areas.

### Meeting the Challenges of Inclusive Road Maintenance

Local maintenance groups received lump sum payments of 100,000 VND a day ) per person for each for each section of road completed. This presented a challenge for team members and organizers for selecting workers, since in many instances supply outweighed demand. Thankfully, citizens from Nam Mon, Nam Det, Hoang Thu Pho and Ban Lien provided an organic solution: steering committees rotated available positions among all women living in selected targeted communes. This rotation scheme enabled total participation and greater buy-in from participating communities, and created an environment of trust and mutual support.

### The Road Ahead

The World Bank’s task team recently initiated a dialogue with Vietnam’s Project Management Unit to incorporate a cooperative co-management approach into RTP3 in order to address remaining logistical problems to scale-up current efforts to local infrastructure development. With the closing of RTP3, it is hoped that the Government will adopt a number of lessons learned from this experience and promote participation of ethnic minority people in general and women in particular into future road development projects.

### Key Lessons Learned

The recently piloted approach highlights two significant lessons for the transport sector relating to gender-based social inclusion and rural road

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*“Regarding efficiency, I think—for the first time women have started to realize that maintenance is necessary for commuting, and serves the local communities that they live in”*

— TRAN THI KHANH,  
Vice President of Lao Cai  
Women’s Union

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maintenance. Involving local ethnic women in rural road maintenance can:

- 1) Enhance the role of women in communities where husbands’ decision making is still dominant, and where income generation opportunities are limited to during off-farm season.
- 2) Improve awareness of value added by maintaining rural roads. This in turn generates indirect impacts on enabling gender equity in access to human development resources, which are often not available in remote and relatively inaccessible areas.

### Innovation

The experience highlights two major innovations:

- 1) RTP3 demonstrates that productivity, profitability and accountability in rural networks management in Vietnam could be enhanced using innovative approach to educating and collaboration with rural



ethnic women. A collaborative learning environment creates social benefits and increases the stock of social capital that can be beneficial to other development projects.

- 2) The pilot training program has established an innovative platform to quantitatively monitor tangible outcomes of road maintenance at the household level among diverse ethnic minority groups.

### Further Reading

<http://www.worldbank.org/vn> (Link to: Vietnam: Ethnic minority women participate in regular maintenance of rural roads)  
Vietnam: Third Rural Transport Project (P075407)

### Contacts

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