



Red River Delta Ha Tay and Hai Duong

Participatory Poverty Assessment

2003

**Red River Delta
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Participatory
Poverty Assessment**

Hanoi, September 2003

Foreword by the Poverty Task Force

In May 2002, the Government of Vietnam finalized its Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) and embarked on a process to make the CPRGS a reality at local levels of Government. Through information campaigns and a series of regional workshops, officials from key national ministries have been explaining to representatives from local authorities how local level planning processes could be made more pro-poor, more evidence-based, more outcome-focused, better aligned to resource allocation decisions and better monitored.

During 2003 the Poverty Task Force (PTF) supported Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) in twelve provinces in Vietnam. These PPAs used a common research framework and methodology to investigate issues around poverty that were not well captured by the available quantitative data. The intention was to produce research which could be used, together with data from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, to inform the CPRGS secretariat on progress to date in implementing the CPRGS. The PPAs were also designed to provide information for new regional and national studies of poverty and these have now been published separately. The regional poverty assessments will, in turn, be used as an instrument in building capacity in pro-poor planning processes at sub-national levels of Government.

Eight donors contributed financial and human resources to support the PPAs underlying the preparation of this report and its complementary RPAs. These are the ADB, AusAID, DFID, GTZ, JICA, SCUK, UNDP and the World Bank. Each of the donors played a leading role in one of the regions of Vietnam. The distribution of regions among donors, summarized in Table A, was based on the donors' trajectory in the field. By choosing regions where they are well-implanted, through projects and technical assistance activities, donors could take full advantage of the insights accumulated while working there.

Several teams conducted the PPA work in 43 communes scattered across the entire country. Among them were two international NGOs (Action Aid and SCUK) and various local NGOs and research institutes, including CRP, the Institute of Sociology (IOS), the Long An Primary Health Care Center, the Rural Development Service Center (RDSC) and Vietnam Solutions. In addition, two of the donors carried out the research by setting up teams of local researchers under their direct management. The local knowledge and expertise of these NGOs and research institutes was key to the quality of the exercise. A coordinating mechanism was set up for the PPAs. Members of most of the research teams were involved in drawing up the research framework and establishing a common understanding of what was to be achieved from the field research. The latter was

piloted by several of the teams and the research outline was modified to reflect the lessons learned. The final research framework covered the following areas of investigation:

- Perceptions of and trends in poverty, poverty dynamics and vulnerability;
- Progress in strengthening democracy at the grassroots level, especially the degree to which poor households can participate in a meaningful way in planning and budgeting processes;
- Challenges in the delivery of basic services, focusing on how poor households interact with service providers and how poor households can be empowered to claim their rights to basic services more effectively;
- The current mechanisms for delivery of social assistance (linked to the targeting work above) and how they might be improved;
- How the reform of the public administration is taking place at local levels of Government;
- The challenges of migration and the link between household mobility, poverty and access to services; and,
- Information about the environment of the poor and how it is changing.

These PPAs are now being published as a series. A separate report will synthesise the findings across the 43 communes and provide a more aggregated analysis of these themes. Another report summarizes the approach to the research, the methodology use and sets out the detailed research questions.

Table A: Partnerships for the Regional Poverty Work

Region	Provinces included in the region	Donor in charge of the RPAs	PPAs			Team in charge of the PPAs
			Province	District	Communes	
Northeast Uplands	Ha Giang , Cao Bang, Lao Cai, Bac Kan, Lang Son, Tuyen Quang, Yen Bai, Thai Nguyen, Phu Tho, Vinh Phuc, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Quang Ninh	DFID and UNDP	Lao Cai	Bao Thang	Ban Cam Phong Nien	Ageless Consultants (funded by DFID)
				Muong Khuong	Pha Long Ta Gia Khau	
			Ha Giang	Vi Xuyen	Cao Bo Thuan Hoa	Action Aid (funded by UNDP)
				Dong Van	Sang Tung Thai Pin Tung	
Northwest Uplands	Lai Chau, Son La, Hoa Binh					
Red River Delta	Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Ha Tay, Hai Duong, Hung Yen, Ha Nam, Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, Ninh Binh	WB	Hai Duong	Nam Sach	Nam Sach Nam Trung	RDSC (funded by WB)
			Ha Tay	Dan Phuong	Tho An Lien Ha	
				My Duc	Te Tieu Phuc Lam	
North Central	Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue	GTZ and JICA	Nghe An	Nghi Loc	Nghi Thai	IOS (funded by JICA)
				Tuong Duong	Tam Dinh	
			Quang Tri	Hai Lang	Hai Son Hai An	Team comprising MOLISA, ILSSA and independent researchers (funded by GTZ)
				Gio Linh	Gio Thanh Linh Thuong	
Central Coast	Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa	ADB	Quang Ngai	Son Ha	Son Ba Son Cao	Vietnam Solutions (funded by ADB)
				Tu Nghia	Nghia Tho Nghia An	

Table A: Partnerships for the Regional Poverty Work (continued)

Region	Provinces included in the region	Donor in charge of the RPAs	PPAs			Team in charge of the PPAs
			Province	District	Communes	
Central Highlands	Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak	ADB	Dak Lak	EaHleo	Eaheo Ea Ral	Action Aid (funded by ADB)
				Daclap	Đao Nghia Quang Tan	
				Buon Ma Thuot city	Ea Tam town	
Southeast	HCMC, Lam Dong, Ninh Thuan, Binh Phuoc, Tay Ninh, Binh Duong, Dong Nai, Binh Than, Ba Ria-Vung Tau	WB	HCMC	Binh Chanh District	An Lac Township Tan Tao	SCUK (Funded by itself)
				District 8	Ward 4 Ward 5	
			Ninh Thuan	Ninh Phuoc	Phuoc Hai Phuoc Dinh	CRP (Funded by WB)
				Ninh Son	Luong Son My Son	
Mekong River Delta	Long An, Dong Thap, An Giang, Tien Giang, Vinh Long, Ben Tre, Kien Giang, Can Tho, Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau	UNDP and AusAid	Dong Thap	Tam Nong	Phu Hiep Phu Tho	Long An Primary Health Care Centre (Funded by UNDP and AusAid)
				Thap Muoi	Thanh Loi	
			Ben Tre	Thanh Phu	My Hung Thoi Thanh	
				Mo Cay	Thanh Thoi	

List of Abbreviations and Local Units

CHC	Commune Health Clinic
CPC	Commune People's Committee: the commune government
CPRGS	Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy
CRP	The Centre for Rural Progress, a Vietnamese NGO
DCP	District People's Committee: the district government
DOLISA	Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
EFA	Education for All Action Plan
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GSO	General Statistics Office
HYV	High Yield Variety
INGO	International NGO
KIA	Killed-in-Action
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PAR	Public Administration Reform
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessments
PPC	Province People's Committee: the provincial government
PTA	Parent - Teacher Association, an informal mass organisation
PTF	Poverty Task Force
RDSC	Rural Development Services Centre
RPPA	Regional Participatory Poverty Assessment
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
SWOT	Strengths-Weakness-Opportunities-Threats Analysis
<i>Thuoc</i>	A land area measurement unit, 1 <i>thuoc</i> = 36 SqM
VLSS	Vietnam Living Standards Survey
VND	Vietnam Dong: monetary unit, VND15,500.00 = USD1.00
WB	The World Bank in Vietnam
WU	Women's Union, a mass organisation

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This Regional Poverty Assessment (RPPA) was completed with significant contributions from a number of people at various levels and from diverse backgrounds. The RPPA team would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to all. Firstly, we are indebted to the people from Ha Tay and Hai Duong Province, both men and women from all wealth groups, for sharing information with us. Their knowledge and analysis provides the basis for this report. We have had the opportunity to observe and admire the efforts of people from diverse backgrounds in their struggle for a better life. Their efforts have laid the groundwork for the continuously growing prosperity of our society.

We are thankful to government staff in the two provinces at all levels – province, district, commune and village – for their active and open contributions, and for their participation in the assessment. Their connections, relationships with people, coordination, information and analysis were critical to the success of this assessment. We are indebted to them for their cooperation in assigning staff to this RPPA for a long, but necessary, 20 days in the field. A special acknowledgement is addressed to the Ha Tay and Hai Duong Departments of Planning and Investments (DPI) for their organisational and coordinating support.

We highly appreciate the efforts made by volunteers and associates, who came from local and international non-government organisations (INGOs), universities, research institutes and other government institutions. It is their effective cooperation, hard work and commitment to the objective of the RPPA that made this RPPA a reality. They enriched this assessment by contributing profound knowledge and diverse perspectives.

We would like also to thank the Poverty Task Force and the WB for input in the form of the research framework and questionnaires. We are thankful to the WB for the financial support of this assessment. Special contributions were also made by WB staff. Ms Nguyen Thi Hoa offered our team an efficient logistic backup, and Mr Vohlpal Markus helped our team with his kind and friendly but effective monitoring support.

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Executive Summary

Research and its methodology This report presents the findings of the Regional Participatory Poverty Assessment (RPPA) conducted by the Rural Development Services Centre (RDSC) in two provinces in the Red River Delta region, Ha Tay and Hai Duong, at the request of the WB in July and August 2003. The assessment aims to support the government in the CPRGS implementation process by filling analytical gaps and informing the monitoring systems, as well as capacity building at sub-national levels of government. The assessment topics include poverty and its dynamics, patterns of participation in local decision-making, basic public service delivery mechanisms to the poor, social assistance programmes, delivery of public administration services, migration, and environment.

The study approach incorporated elements of Participatory Poverty Assessments. A number of participatory poverty assessment tools were applied, among which the two key instruments are the focus group discussion (FGD) and the semi-structured interview (SSI). In sampled districts, Dan Phuong and My Duc in Ha Tay Province and Nam Sach in Hai Duong province, the RPPA consulted with more than 1,200 people (36% of whom were women), so that it reflects the views of citizens from all socio-economic groups and of government officials at all levels.

Poverty dynamics The standard of living has continuously improved over the last three years in Vietnam and poverty has widely decreased. Government officials, the poor and other villagers all reported improvements in assured food availability and its quality.

Government officials attributed poverty reduction to improvements in infrastructure, delivery of public services, targeted poverty reduction programmes and agricultural technology. The 'reform' or *Doi Moi* itself is considered a strong motivator that promotes and encourages initiatives and innovations by farmers to improve living standards. For the poor, the most important factor in poverty reduction is increased opportunities for non-farm income generation. In a participatory wealth ranking, the poor indicated that poverty reduction factors also include geography, common infrastructure, experience in rural industry and/or trade, and the value of education and its somewhat related activity of entrepreneurship. Education and entrepreneurship are seen as critical long-term development factors. However, young and well-educated labourers are migrating to urban areas, taking away this valuable investment.

A small group of villagers return to a life of poverty for a variety of causes. A household may be unable to cope with the loss of a breadwinner, a health problem or an investment failure. Female-headed households are one group that is affected. Another group is older couples who are not supported by young adults within their family.

Factors speeding up poverty reduction primarily relate to human or social capital: education, vocational training for the poor and women, appropriate technology for the food processing industry, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, compulsory/voluntary schemes for work safety, and insurance for short-term or casual employment. The other factor is improvements in the investment environment.

Village authorities have identified appropriate households as 'poor'. However, a number of poor households are not yet included in this list because of the quota system. Although this quota system was considered reasonable because of financial limits on health insurance, the quota should not be the same for all villages and communes.

The process of identifying poor households reaches the village level, but the community and the poor should be included in this process. The community meeting is proposed as the best means for executing this exercise.

Delivery of basic services Basic services examined in the RPPA were education, health and extension services.

Poverty is a major factor limiting poor households from covering *education* costs. By removing fees for primary education, and reducing the school fees at other levels of education, the poor have better access to education. The value of education is promoted as a way to alleviate poverty. The requirements of industry for higher education, and the need for pre-school education in order for students to enter primary school, are factors that promote the need for education. Educational improvements are expressed in the enhancement and availability of school facilities, and the quality of teachers.

The school drop-out rate is high amongst the poor. Children of the poor may leave school before finishing secondary or even primary school. Furthermore, villagers said that the number of students from their communities entering universities is decreasing. An important factor constraining children of poor households to continue their education is the high cost of education, which rises as a student reaches a higher level. The poor reported that the high non-monetary costs of obtaining fee exemption and reduction certificates drive them away from these benefits.

PTAs, as voluntary organisations, have a potential to play a positive role. A PTA has some elements of a civic society organisation. It is not-for-profit, non-government and has a democratic leadership. Its leadership and management are formed by free and democratic election. Current PTAs primarily perform complementary functions to support the school, playing important roles in the process of 'socialisation', and passing the costs of education services on to individuals or households. But PTAs face a challenge because school staff reject the idea that a PTA should be able to comment on or evaluate teaching quality, or be involved in class planning.

Currently, PTAs are managed and lead by an elite group. The parents in the poor group feel incapable of participating in the PTAs' activities and are marginalised by other members of the group. They do not see the benefits of becoming involved in these associations. As the PTA is neutral, and has no pro-poor value, it does not represent the specific interests of the poor to the school administration. Having no voice yet in the PTAs' activities, the poor are distant from this institution.

The RPPA proposes stronger action for the pro-poor education programme. This programme should ensure that the poor be exempted from school fees at all levels. The school library should be in a position to offer free hire of textbooks for students from poor households. Vocational education for students from poor households should be fee-free. Additionally, support to university students from poor households should be guaranteed. To make the poverty card more effective, the government should ensure that cards be made available to the poor before the school year starts, ensuring that the poor benefit fully from government policies on poverty alleviation and education.

In regard to Parent Teacher Associations, the assessment proposes to develop a sample charter for PTAs, which would ensure that the PTAs become democratic organisations. It is desirable to provide some education for PTA managers on pro-poor values, as well as on guiding the PTAs in representing parents' interests, especially those of poorer households.

In regard to *health services*, the government made an enormous financial contribution by providing health insurance cards for the poor in an effort to further reduce poverty. Although not all poor people have actually made use of the health insurance service, for a number of people it strongly reduces health treatment costs, preventing the household from falling further into poverty.

Villagers found that the process of selection was successful in that those selected for health insurance cards were people who were poor, not better-off. However, this process could be improved in terms of its transparency. The current system only lets the poor know the results of this process when they are given the cards: other villagers do not know about the selection. It could also be further improved in terms of the participation of the community. So far, only the village leadership is involved in this process. The existing quota limits the number of insurance cards, based on the quota for the number of the poor households, and excludes many poor and needy households.

The poor felt that the ceiling set for medication costs constrains effective health treatment. Experiences with the health card demonstrate cases of low quality care and medication, scaring some poor people away from using the card. Missing information regarding eligible services and the costs of medication allowed by a card also limits the poor in using this government support.

To the poor, the commune health station is the most suitable in delivering needed services for the best treatment. However, the CHCs are not well staffed and

equipped and available drugs are limited. CHC health staff argue that the ceiling set for medication forces them to refer their patients to hospitals at a higher level, where the costs for treatment and hospitalisation are much higher, while their own capacity is under-utilised.

Improvements in transparency and the participation of villagers during the selection process for health insurance card beneficiaries has the potential to strengthen citizen's monitoring and supervision over this process. Commune and village governments should ensure that citizens are better informed about who is eligible for this public service, what it offers and how the service can be accessed. Information on health services that are free for insurance card holders should be made available in public health centres and also printed right on the cards. Another measure to improve the transparency of the health system could be an individual clients' evaluation, which functions as a public monitor. This system helps to ensure that hidden costs do not hit clients, particularly those who are protected by health insurance cards.

It is proposed that the quota system for poor households in any community is reviewed, the outcome being the removal of the quota for health insurance cards. Similarly, the RPPA proposes that a review of the quota system for medication at commune health clinics be undertaken in order to build-up service capacity at this level of health care. This measure would improve access by the poor to health services, reducing the costs for health checks and treatment.

Extension systems are well established, reaching to the commune level. However, extension services are under-resourced and unable to fully implement their programmes. Extension service technical staff have limited experience. They are not yet trained in extension techniques and methods. The training mostly focuses on theory, and is far from being practical.

Current extension services have no explicit responsibility or mandate to assist the poor as a special group, or to support farmers in their access to markets. The staff have limited knowledge and skills to work with and for the poor. Extension programmes suffer from issues of gender-blindness and insensitiveness to the needs of the poor.

Like other farmers, the poor currently benefit from access to high yield variety (HYV) seeds for food crops, vaccination for animals and information on pest control. These services are the same for farmers of all wealth groups. However, the current cost of HYV crops and animals promoted by the extension services are expensive, and beyond the capacity of the poor.

Similar to education and health systems, policy in agricultural extension should have a poverty focus. A pro-poor extension programme is suggested to address the priority issue of food security, which is not yet achieved among the poor. The extension services should consider the specific needs of the poor, such as their

animal production systems, vulnerability to investment failures because of diseases, few physical assets, high indebtedness and weak social networks.

Further, as women are the key people responsible for agricultural production, agricultural extension should involve women in all of its activities. Access by the poor and women to the services offered by the agricultural extension system is proposed as a monitoring indicator for the policy's success. It is important to ensure adequate human, financial and technical resources for the agricultural extension system in order to support these policy measures.

Targeted Assistance Programme Although there is a safety programme in villages to address the increasing need for social support, the government has a limited capacity to address these needs. There is no formal established social safety scheme for accidents. The formal social targeting assistance provides regular allowances and irregular gifts at celebratory times to war martyrs, war invalids and families of those Killed in Action. The other group of beneficiaries are people who are unrelated to war but who cannot help themselves or refer to any direct family members for assistance.

Beneficiaries and community members highly appreciate both the material and spiritual aspects of targeted assistance, particularly the value of this support in maintaining life and meeting the basic needs of vulnerable groups. However, the current level of support for beneficiaries of the targeted assistance programme is low, equal to only half of that required for a person to live above the poverty line. The RPPA suggests doubling the assistance in order to at least reach the poverty line cut-off. An unresolved issue is that this programme does not cover all those who are in great need of assistance, according to assessment by the villagers.

The process of identifying beneficiaries for the targeted assistance programme is participatory at the village level to a certain extent, involving staff of village institutions who use an appropriate selection process. Formal targeted assistance triggers informal community support, but this process could be further improved in order for the community to be more responsive to their more needy fellow villagers; for example, by allowing villagers to be informed about criteria used to identify beneficiaries. Currently, the selection process is conducted with a low participation by the community, who are poorly informed about eligibility criteria and benefits for needy people. Households unrelated to war have little knowledge about how and where they can get support. The poor, and other groups who suffer from disasters, accidents or vulnerability, are not always recipients, having no clear information about their rights.

An issue for improvement in the social assistance area is the frequency of disbursements. Although the current quarterly paid scheme conveniently reduces office time, it keeps the poor waiting too long for their allowance. Furthermore, control of the programme at district level is hindering its effectiveness. This could be improved by delegating responsibility for identifying and verifying programme beneficiaries, and the transfer of funds to beneficiaries, to the CPC.

Evaluation of the efficiency of emergency support could be a quality indicator. In this case, the district authority would play a role in providing assurance and quality improvement.

Public Administration Reform (PAR) Drastic changes are being implemented under the administrative reform programme. Government departments have been restructured, and responsibilities clarified. Older staff have been encouraged to retire and the number of divisions reduced. During this process, district and commune governments have sometimes had to deal with the issue of multi-function, which arises when staff levels are cut and some positions therefore do not have a salary allocation. These changes also bring situations where the lines of authority and responsibility are unclear.

PAR programmes assist government staff with training, providing formal and informal education to address personnel needs. Staffing is flexible to allow for the recruitment and hire of personnel that will equip all levels of government with young and educated staff according to their own needs.

PAR promotes a higher level of professionalism within government services. Clear administrative processes were set up for performing and coordinating tasks between divisions. The processes are made open to the public; deadlines are announced in order to allow for a reaction to the citizens' requests. These services are performed during office hours, according to a pre-announced timetable. Official documents are typed; hand-written official documents no longer exist.

Similar to government officers, the change in status of the CPC's staff has the potential to have a positive impact on villagers, because the officers will improve their professionalism, be responsible for being paid adequately and have less need to engage in 'site-business'. However, villagers also see a possible negative effect in an increasing bureaucratism that may further distance citizens, and which may need to be addressed with preventive measures. In implementing this reform, government staff felt that there is a gap between the requirements of their job and the level of their education and skills, which currently is larger than that desired. Commune officers expressed a great need for training in public administration knowledge and skills in order to function effectively.

While there are citizens who, having worked with the government or army before, are strong enough to make complaints and approach government offices in order to promote their rights, the poor and women may feel helpless. Both groups do not have a clear idea of where to get effective legal or administrative advice. As district and commune levels of government do not have appropriate filing and/or archive systems, the capacity of local governments to respond to citizens' queries is limited.

Administrative reform progress varies in the eyes of villagers. Some citizens are content with the efficiency and transparency of administrative services. Others are not happy with the 'red-tape' and the lack of transparency of fee schemes. In some localities, the process of registration can be lengthy because the concerned officers

are absent, or the fee charges have not been announced. Further administrative reforms should have a focus on capacity building for government officers at the commune level. Legal advice is an area that appears the least developed in the visited areas, and is another area of attention for further development. A 'check and inspect' mechanism should be in place to ensure the high performance of PAR in all locations.

A challenge remains for the PAR to be pro-poor . To do this they must face the argument that the poor benefit to a lesser degree, while the better-off are the primary beneficiaries of the PAR because they use more of its services. The poor do not often report on the benefits of PAR. However some complained that officials treated them without proper respect or politeness.

The one-stop shop is not yet implemented in the visited districts. However, government staff are prepared to face the challenges of this measure, which might require additional costs, including investment in office infrastructure and human resources.

Since the introduction of new company laws, the number of enterprises has increased, creating more local jobs. Entrepreneurs are satisfied with administrative services and with administrative costs, in terms of both money and time. Current administrative processes are simple and paperwork needed for registrations is minimal. To entrepreneurs, the fact that government offices work to set pre-announced hours is already an important progress. In craft villages, business developments need policy makers to address the issue of land-use planning, something that constrains their growth.

Migration The main flow of migration is in the out-going direction. The direction of out-going migration and its related types of income generation are connected to wealth groups. The better-off have a greater chance of being hired overseas in a labour export arrangement, or obtaining a salary-based job in a company. The destination of the poor is temporary or seasonal low-paid work in local areas or urban centres. Gender division is distinct, with women seeking jobs as house helpers or petty traders, while men work mainly on construction sites.

Migration is seen as a poverty reduction force, having mainly positive impacts on the life of the migrants, their families and the community. The positive aspects are increased income and savings, opportunities for exposure to new experiences and increased social networks. Migration also brings negative aspects, such as a drain of male and young educated labour forces from local communities, leaving no room for the improvement of the quality of the labour force. Women are left with a doubled burden of housework and fieldwork. Migration may also increase the rate of divorce and the threat of spreading HIV/AIDs to rural communities.

There are several constraining factors to migration, such as limited job opportunities in urban areas, the low education of rural dwellers, limited access to well-paid and stable jobs, and decreased effectiveness in job placement services.

Migrants adapt well to their new locations, by honouring local regulations, donations and fees. They are treated fairly by local governments. They have access to locally paid services, such as health, water or electricity. However, migrants have no access to financial services, and are unable to register their newborns. Leave permits are only valid for six months, and this is considered too short.

Environment As the environment is defined in close connection with the villagers' living and working conditions, clean water and sanitation, pesticide use, and waste management are emerging concerns. It is observed that damage to the environment is a worsening trend. Waste management is becoming an issue that needs to be addressed in rural areas.

In one visited district, the polluted surface water was felt to be a real problem. The pollutants are human and animal waste, pesticide waste and residues, and industrial waste. One coping strategy would be a shift away from open wells and using water from ponds, lakes or rivers to the establishment of bore-wells with or without filtering systems. The poor do not have access to these systems.

Farmers were widely trained in IPM techniques and these have been practiced for many years. Knowledge and skills on pest management have assisted farmers to rationally use pesticides and chemical fertilisers, thus helping maintain a better environment. However, villagers felt that land fertility is decreasing as a result of intensive and long-time use of chemicals, while organic composts are being used less and less.

Waste management needs are emerging as an issue in villages, as the current system is incapable of processing human waste and this is coupled with an increase in animal waste. An emerging problem is increasing animal production at a household level, with a drainage system that has remained unchanged for years. Some community-based waste management schemes are emerging as a collective action by the community, with the maintenance costs covered by households.

The current concerns suggest a policy that should include environmental issues in socio-economic planning, using community-based management approaches. Waste collecting and processing units, the management of plastic and pesticide containers or cover bags, and environment protection rules should be established by the community in agreement with the government.

Improvement of village infrastructure is emerging as an environment priority. A policy measure should promote household-based or village-based waste processing technology in the face of increasing animal production. Challenges to be coped with are the low awareness of the long terms benefits of changes to environmental management, the low capacity for fund raising for these public benefits, and the lack of environmental planning capacity.

Chapter 1: Background

“In the PPA, we have to present what we are told by people: the poor, men, women and government officers. This is important to the government in monitoring poverty reduction policies. Otherwise, why should we do this PPA?” A government officer, PPA training workshop

As part of an effort to update an understanding of poverty in Vietnam, the WB in Vietnam and various donors have prepared regional poverty assessments, focusing on the specific dimensions of poverty in each region. This report presents the findings for the regional participatory poverty assessment (RPPA) conducted by a team assigned by the Rural Development Services Centre (RDSC). The RPPA was conducted in two provinces in the Red River Delta region, Ha Tay and Hai Duong, at the request of the WB.

1. 1. Objectives

The participatory assessment forms a key component of the overall poverty assessment in the region. It aims to capture elements of poverty and its causes, improving areas where there is insufficient understanding of poverty, and filling gaps from missing measurements in the formal GSO household survey. The objectives of the RPPA are summarised as follows:

1. Obtain a better understanding of poverty and its determinants, in particular to fill analytical gaps that could prevent the government from reaching its stated priorities in the CPRGS.
2. Assess current patterns of participation in local decision-making, service delivery mechanisms to the rural poor and urban migrants, and coverage by social assistance programmes. These are common topics to be covered in all regions.
3. Analyse the effectiveness of current government policy measures, policy implementation and service delivery mechanisms to the poor, and discuss measures for improvement.
4. Build the capacity of local level officials and researchers to undertake a participatory dialogue with the poor on policy issues.
5. Help strengthen the monitoring framework of the CPRGS through a better definition of indicators, especially where these are currently ill defined, and including those related to governance and service delivery.

These objectives relate to support for the government in implementing the CPRGS, either through filling analytical gaps, providing information to the monitoring systems or capacity building at sub-national levels of government.

1.2. Study Topics

The CPRGS proposed several social and poverty targets, and progress in many of these areas has been well described by the household survey data. Therefore, it makes the greatest sense to focus on issues where the current body of analytical work has gaps, and where the dimensions of poverty have been poorly captured by quantitative data. This is why the focus of this participatory study is on seven core topics, which were covered in all sites (three districts in the two provinces). The topics are: (1) poverty and its determinants; (2) current patterns of participation in local decision-making; (3) basic public service delivery mechanisms to the poor; (4) coverage by social assistance programmes; (5) delivery of public administration services; (6) migration; and (7) environment.

1.3. RPPA Approach, Tools and Techniques

The Research Framework This assessment was carried out in a way that (a) builds the capacity of local planners to use more analysis in their local planning processes; and (b) is influential at a national level by feeding into the CPRGS progress report and the development of a monitoring framework.

The RPPA team followed a common research agenda and a set of research questions, as well as RPPA guidelines, which were all developed by the PTF. These instruments were piloted and tested in Ninh Thuan province by the Centre for Rural Progress (CRP). The assessment team used the detailed list of questions, which were broken down for each research topic.

In its preparation phase, the assessment team sent three people to Ninh Thuan province to join a pre-test. The pre-test examined the appropriateness of the research questions, methods and tools, as well as the processes used in the villages and communes. The researchers, who had already obtained first hand experience in Ninh Thuan, served as resource people during this assessment. A learning exchange was included in the training programme, which was delivered to the researchers before they travelled out to the field.

Methodology and Research Processes The study approach incorporated elements of the Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs). It paid attention to maximising its comparability with other on-going poverty assessments in other regions in the country. Some comparisons with the quantitative household data were incorporated.

The RPPA took measures to address important considerations during the planning and implementation phases, such as a) maximising capacity-building for participatory policy research and, in the future, participatory monitoring of government strategies; b) maximising local and national government ownership

of the research; and c) linking with local institutions to build mechanisms for future participatory monitoring and evaluation work.

It was planned that capacity building would be achieved through the three-day training, and through the process of working with experienced researchers recruited from Hanoi. The training was delivered by the research manager and three other trainers.

Using the skills enhanced at the training, the researchers, both outsiders and locals, worked together for 20 days in the field. At this time, the research skills of local partners were further enhanced through facilitation of the process of data collection and analysis with the poor and women in the localities. The process of consultation, data collection and analysis started at the provincial level, and continued through to the district, commune, village and household levels.

At the conclusion, and after data processing, the researchers presented the preliminary findings to local government for verification and validation at workshops in each province.

Ownership by local government started not only with the training, where the local partners joined the planning process of data collection and data analysis, but also by making decisions on local information sources and arranging a detailed timetable for consultations with the poor women and men. At the end-of-research workshop, the early-phase summarised data and analysis was presented to province officials to be used by them in local policy reviews and adjustments.

In accordance with a participatory approach, this RPPA made efforts to create a multi-disciplinary team, with members originating from inside and outside the research areas (see Table 1). This team of 40 researchers was well balanced in terms of gender: nearly half of the team were women. The team was comprised of a large group of local researchers (15 officials) assigned by a number of departments of the province and district governments from the research sites. As a whole, the research provided a great learning experience for all researchers, both local and Hanoi-based.

Table 1: Composition of the Research Team

Researchers	Number	Women
Local	15	8
Hanoi- Based	25	11
Total	40	19

The RPPA applied a number of participatory poverty assessment tools, among which the two key instruments were the focus group discussion (FGD) and the semi-structured interview (SSI). The basis for the FGD and SSI was the questionnaire guideline, developed by the Poverty Task Force (PTF) for RPPA application in twelve provinces. Among the other participatory tools, the most frequently used included case studies, SWOT, household wealth ranking, community ranking, problem tree, seasonal chart and Venn diagram.

Before visiting the sites, to further the assessment skills of the Hanoi-based and local researchers, the RPPA organised a three-day workshop where the researchers were trained in the RPPA concept, its approach, RPPA's design and plan, and RPPA data collection tools and techniques. A special focus of the training was recording and note-taking techniques, as well as analysis of the qualitative data. As the assessment went on-site, additional researchers were trained as needed in the field; for example, on case study methods or report writing.

During the RPPA, the quality of data collection and analysis was controlled and assured by a quality manager and three supervisors on the site. Every evening, each research team arranged an internal review and on-the-spot analytical session to evaluate their performance for the day and draw appropriate lessons, and to plan for the next day of fieldwork.

1.4. Assessment Sites and Samples

Site Selection In line with guidance offered by the PTF, the RPPA selected the district and communes for the study using the criteria of 1) representation of poverty issues, such as urban, rural, inter-relation between urban and rural, and impacts of anti-poverty programmes, etc; and 2) connection to the Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VLSS).

In the selected provinces, located in the heart of the Red River Delta region, the Dan Phuong and My Duc districts (Ha Tay Province) and the Nam Sach district (Hai Duong province) were selected as the research sites using the criteria set by the RPPA. In each district, study communes and villages were selected in consultation with province, district and commune governments. It is expected that the results from Hai Duong would represent an urban centre surrounded by many rural communities, while the results from Ha Tay would be characteristic of an area neighbouring to the nation's capital.

During the 20 days of fieldwork, the RPPA team was able to consult with almost 1,200 people. About half of the consulted people were ordinary citizens from all socio-economic groups. The remainder represented government officials at all levels, from the village to the provincial. Among the total informants, 36% were women. However, among the citizens, the rate of women was higher. The

assessment team reached about 40% of female respondents in this group, in order to make the voice of women better heard.

Table 2: Sample in the Research Sites

Level of Consultation	Analytical Sessions		People Consulted		
	FGD and other group analytical techniques	Semi-Structured Interview	Female	Male	Total people consulted
Province	13	20	10	40	50
District	21	35	12	62	74
Commune	55	63	36	164	200
Village	49	80	160	177	337
Citizen	207	157	202	313	515
Total	345	355	420	756	1176

Source: *The Survey*

1.5. Limitations

In addition to general limitations in qualitative research practices, the assessment team found that this RPPA could have improved in certain areas, such as in the composition of the research team and informants, and the types of research tools utilised. The lessons learned could be helpful for planning future consultations.

Regarding team composition, the research would have benefited greatly if the team were able to mobilise policy analysts of various backgrounds relevant to the research themes to match its wide sectoral approach. In addition, the research team was insufficiently staffed with experts who had a background in public administration and education.

Concerning the sample size of the FGDs, the research team found that there was not as many informants as planned, especially informants from the provincial government and business people. It was a great challenge for the assessment team to interest these groups in the process of consultation. Thus the opinion of these groups may not be well represented.

In relation to the research tools, the assessment team believed that the detailed questionnaire guidelines restricted researchers to the set questions, thus hindering their ability to exercise their own initiative in pursuing the objectives and qualitative approach required. Because of the translation back and forth

from English to Vietnamese, the accuracy of some questions in the guidelines was troublesome for the researchers during both training and fieldwork.

The assessment team also noticed that recording and documenting FGDs and SSIs by hand was challenging. This technique required an advanced level of note-taking skills, which took some researchers, especially local ones, a long time with which to become familiar. This limited the completion of the first two days' records, but this situation largely improved with the team's quality assurance efforts.

Chapter 2: Perceptions of Poverty

“Our living has improved in all aspects. People in my commune do not live in muddy and thatched houses any longer. All have enough daily food. Now we eat rice, but not added with cassava, maize or sweet potato, like three years ago. People can afford household items for both their bodies and minds. Children go to schools.” CPC officers, Dan Phuong District

This chapter scrutinises perceptions of and trends in poverty, poverty dynamics, and vulnerability in relation to the CPRGS target of reducing poverty significantly in the whole country. The examination of the way people perceive poverty is conducted through the provision of the *actual* ideas poor people have about poverty and the way it can be reduced.

2.1. Poverty Trends

The RPPA found that, in all visited communities, people consulted at all levels reported that living standards have been improving over the last three years. Poverty has widely decreased. The My Duc District People's Committee (DPC) reported that the poverty rate was 13.9% of the population in the district, and that this poverty rate went down to 9.5% in 2002. The Commune People's Committees (CPCs) in all visited communes also showed statistics to the RPPA team which demonstrated success in poverty reduction. For example, the CPC's Tho An officer in Dan Phuong told the team that in 2002 there were 116 poor households in the commune and that this figure decreased to 91 households in 2003. The poor villagers, both men and women, described enhancements to their lives by indicating improvements in food availability, household assets and clothing. A women's group representing the poor in a village of Te Tieu township stated that: “Yes, our lives have been improved. The poor now have enough food around the year. Rice is affordable to us, and we do not have to eat food from subsidiary crops¹, such as maize, cassava or sweet potato”. Other groups also confirmed that the number of months of food shortage has been drastically reduced. This is most notable in My Duc district, where the poor farmers reported that food shortages have been reduced from a period of six months to three months over the last three years. A number of semi-structured interviews with poor households indicated that they could now buy household utilities, such as second-hand televisions or bicycles. Some reported that they could afford to keep their children at school.

Describing poverty reduction, government officials agreed with the poor and other villagers about improved food security and quality. In addition, they referred to the decreasing rate in building thatched roof houses, the increase in purchases of some household items (such as telephones or motorbikes) in better-

¹ The wealth ranking shows that the poor are not food secure

off households, and improved commune infrastructure, such as roads and local schools. Definitely, the investment in commune infrastructure delivered by Programme 135 encouraged this point of view.

2.2. Factors Contributing to Poverty Reduction

The assessment explored the theme of poverty reduction from the perspective of both government officials and citizens. Government officials at all levels attributed reductions in poverty to factors such as improvements in infrastructure, delivery of public services, targeted poverty reduction programmes and agricultural technology (see Table 3). A general comment made by the government officials is that the ‘reform’ or *Doi Moi* spirit is in itself a motivator that promotes and encourages initiatives and innovations by farmers for improving living standards.

Table 3: Ranking of Factors Contributing to Poverty Alleviation

Factor	Score	Rank
1. Reform policy	100	1
2. Crop diversification self employment	78	2
3. Job creation opportunities	68	3
4. Wage income opportunities	63	4
5. Available credit	62	5
6. Improved knowledge and skills	59	6

Note: A higher score denotes the higher importance of a factor.

Source: Group of CPC officers, Tho An commune

Infrastructure has been improved thanks to an extensive Programme 135, which assisted the community to construct commune or village facilities, such as roads, irrigation, schools, market places and electricity lines. This infrastructure significantly supported improvements in production capacity and access to markets.

The public services referred to by government officials are improved accessibility by the poor, and farmers in general, to micro-financial services and subsidized credit offered by the Vietnam Social Policy Bank (formerly the Vietnam Bank for the Poor), and the services offered by the agricultural extension system (such as extension, veterinary services and pest control). Both services work together and widely facilitate the application of progressive farming technologies, such as the planting of high-yield rice varieties or cash crops. These services also promoted measures such as crop diversification, land consolidation and increased opportunities for non-farm income generation for farmers.

Box 1: Poverty Reduction as Felt by District Government Officials

In our district, in general, the living standards of people improved and poverty has been reduced. There are not so many thatched-roof houses; every village has at least two TVs and a telephone. Village roads were upgraded to gravel surfaces or asphalt. People do not have to eat subsidiary crops. They can afford three meals a day with an improved diet enriched with protein.

Source: FGD with district officials in Hai Duong

The activities of targeted poverty reduction programmes are also acknowledged as important factors contributing to poverty reduction. Specific support, such as subsidies in credit, health insurance cards, gifts and grants, fee exemption and reduction, were considered to be factors contributing to poverty reduction.

For the poor, the most important factor in reducing poverty is increased opportunities for non-farm income generation. In Lien Ha commune, Dan Phuong district, which is adjacent to Hanoi, a poor women's group agreed: "In our village, all farmers who have labour and time go to Hanoi to sell their labour. Mostly we get jobs in masonry, potting and concrete mixing, and all kind of jobs which need simple physical labour." In Tho An commune, in the same district as Lien Ha but relatively far from Hanoi, the CPC recorded that they have 100 male labourers engaged in construction work (concrete mixing, potting, gardening) and 100 female labourers engaged in petty trade relating to food (fruit, toasted meat fibres, banana leaves used for wrapping). Their daily income ranges from VND8,000 to VND20,000.

An example in Nam Sach district well illustrates how non-farm income generation functions as a driving force to reduce poverty. The assessment team heard of approximately ten successful cases of families who escaped poverty, among which one family's household was headed by a woman. All of these households have started non-farm businesses in addition to agricultural production. Their businesses are either in petty trade, food processing or services. An example of a household successfully starting a non-farm business and escaping poverty is presented in Box 2. Similarly, in the other two districts, poor households who escaped poverty and shifted to middle-income groups reported, through SSIs with the assessment team, on their engagement in petty trade, small services or other non-farm income generating activities.

In Hai Duong province, in addition to non-farm income generating opportunities, the poor farmers considered that their improved knowledge and skills in farming technology have been a factor in improving their income.

The assessment team noticed that in all sites, none of the poor mentioned improvements in commune infrastructure (such as roads, schools or irrigation systems) as poverty reduction factors. This could be because these improvements are seen to affect all wealth groupings in the villages, not only the poor. One

might argue further that these kinds of improvements benefit the non-poor to a greater extent, particularly those who have more children going to schools or better vehicles (motorcycles, for instance) in which to travel on the roads.

Box 2: Our Lives have Improved thanks to a Non-farm Activity

Mr Tam², 34, is a resident of Thuy Tra village in Hai Duong province. He told the RPPA team that his family is now no longer considered to be poor. Mr Tam suffers from spinal cord tuberculosis, which was discovered in 1993. He spent a number of years in various hospitals, but the situation did not improve. As he could not farm, he and his wife decided to invest in learning a new skill: producing pottery pots for decorative trees. They spent one year doing vocational training in Chi Linh, a neighbouring district. After two years of apprenticeships in various household businesses, he and his wife were confident that they could start their own home business. Now, his business allows them to generate some VND600,000 a year for a family of four. His wife is responsible for marketing the products in addition to their regular crop farming. Mr Tam takes responsibility for product design and production. Their two daughters are too small to help them. One girl is ten and the other is only five.

Source: SSI

Contrast between the Poor and the Better-off

The RPPA is not in a position to assess how fast economic and social stratification may be occurring, but it can be felt. A poor woman of Tho An commune said: “Yes, I have not seen people getting poorer, but some people have got richer quite remarkably. If our income increased by one or two times, the rich would have their income increased ten times.”

Wealth ranking exercises in all sites demonstrated a strong contrast between the poor and the better-off. While both wealth groupings may have similar arable land area, the assets of the better-off can be ten times more than those of the poor. In a better-off family, an average number of buffaloes or cattle is four to five, while this figure in a poor household is none. Children in a better-off family can finish high school and enter university, while a child of a poor family can afford only secondary school. A better-off family maintains a large network with people in other provinces and towns. In contrast, the social network of a poor family does not reach beyond their family clan and the village boundary.

2.3. Factors for Poverty Reduction for Villages

In an attempt to understand what factors can help a village to fast-track poverty reduction, the RPPA team utilised participatory village ranking exercises in Nam Sach district in three groups, with the participation of 12 officials of Nam Sach

² All personal names have been changed in this report.

Township and five village heads (see Table 4). The result of this exercise revealed that these factors include the village's location (geography), common infrastructure, experience in rural industry and/or trade, value for education, and entrepreneurship.

The groups indicated that poverty reduction and growth takes place within the village arena, and at a faster rate. Villages which have the potential to experience a higher rate of poverty reduction are strategically located right in or near political and economic centres. Further, these villages have well-developed infrastructure, such as irrigation systems, roads, markets and electricity. Retired government officers or employees have returned to these villages, bringing with them knowledge, relationships and capital. Villagers in those communities do their best to ensure that education for their children is available, and the higher the better. Many dwellers are trying various non-farm businesses, such as trade or rural industry, as a driving force to materially improve their lives. A larger number of dwellers diversify their crops, and there is an intensive process of shifting from crop production to animal husbandry, fishing and gardening.

Table 4: Poverty Dynamics

	Escaping poverty to middle income	Moving from middle to better-off
Factors	Hard working Crop and animal production Non-farm activities: trade or services Selling some land on the main roads	Entrepreneurship Large social networks, relationships Food processing Non-traditional (cash) crops
Negative change	Poor getting poorer	Middle income getting poor
Factors	Single female headed household with school-age children Women losing breadwinners (husbands) Health incidents, diseases, sickness Disability	Old couples separated from children Sickness Traffic incidents Failure in investment Health incidents, sicknesses

Source: Wealth ranking and SSI in three districts

In contrast, villages that will improve marginally, stay the same or get behind are described as those that are isolated geographically from economic and political centres, and which are not near main roads. Those communities have low opportunities for trade and rural industry. In these villages, crop production is and will continue to be a major source of income.

The FGDs in all villages indicated that education, and its related activity of entrepreneurship, are critical long-term factors in poverty reduction. Higher education assists young people to find jobs in factories, to export their labour or to work in other urban centres. This outward migration of young and educated labour

may empty rural communities of quality labour, but help them with monetary returns, which are important in the case of export labour (see Section 7.1.).

Table 5: Socio-economic Characteristics of the Poor

Characteristics	Hai Tay	Hai Duong
Natural assets		
Farming land	Equal to others	Some starting to sell land for food
Physical assets:		
Type of houses and location	Small, low-roofed, weak; located far from main roads	Small house as big as a kitchen of the better-off
Available hygiene facilities	Mixed with animal barns	[not touched]
Access to clean water	None	[not touched]
Household electric or electronic utilities	None	None or black and white TV
Access to in-house telephones	None	None
Ruminant animals, pigs	No ruminant, one or no pig, some chickens	No ruminants, one or no pig, some chickens
Food security		
Food self-sufficiency	Missing 2 months a year	Food insufficient (3 to 8 months), borrowing for food
Food quality	Low quality, irregular protein food	[not touched]
Financial assets: household savings	None, refer to loans to address needs	Indebtedness: inability to repay loans issued by Women's Union or banks
Human assets		
Type of occupation	No non-farm activities or selling labour or petty trade in cities/towns	No non-farm activities
Education of the labours	Some illiterate, primary education	Mostly under secondary
Education of children	Low: primary school	Low: secondary
Health	Disability, sick members	Illness, disability
Social assets	Not beyond village and family clan	Single female headed or single old age persons Not attending community meetings

Source: Community wealth ranking; FGDs

This exercise indicated that all village and commune leaders found education and entrepreneurship to be critical long-term development factors. However, all observed that well-educated and young labourers migrate to urban areas, taking away this valuable asset.

In the visited districts, the assessment team met nine representatives of households who were trapped by poverty in the last five years. Their stories

showed that the problems started when a household was unable to cope with the loss of a breadwinner³ (very often a husband), a health problem (such as a disability as a result of a traffic incident or sickness, see Box 3), or an investment failure. In addition to female-headed households, there are cases of old couples whose young adult children have left their old parents helpless and without resources. All these facts point to a missing social protection system, which could provide safety nets for these vulnerable groups.

In all visited communities, the RPPA was informed that in the past five years there are some groups that have been doing much better than other groups. First is the group who has members that are employed or self-employed in non-farm activities, for example, trade or rural industry. Another group is those who are able to diversify their agricultural income, shifting to cash crops or animal production. Households with sufficient of their own financial assets form one group that has also benefited from the reforms, as does people who have close relationships with the power system (the political elite), or who are members of this group, and who are able to buy land near roads or in a place which has market value. Lastly, there is a group of people who have successfully moved to a place near market or urban centres, or a road, where they can conduct a prosperous business.

Box 3: Health Problem Functions as a Poverty Trap

Mr Than's family used to be better-off, but it has quickly fallen into poverty in the last few years because of his wife's health problems. Suffering from a spinal cord disease, his wife has been brought to hospital several times. The family spent some VND1.5 million each time. Since 1998, the total cost of the health problems in Mr Than's family has reached VND15 million. In early 2003, as a poor household, his family was granted a health insurance card. Mr Than thought this card saved his wife's life, but it has also become symbolic of the disastrous economic situation of his family. Now, Mr Than's wife is an invalid. He is in charge of all household chores, including cooking and washing. His adult children help the family with all the farm work. Mr Than is considering raising fish as a way of improving his situation. He hopes that the income from the fishpond could help to cover the cost of further health treatment for his wife.

SSI: Nam Sach, Hai Duong

Summarising the FGDs and SSIs with the various consulted groups and individuals, the assessment team identified several factors that are believed to speed up poverty reduction. It is notable that all these factors relate to human or social capital. The examples are: improving the level of education of the poor, vocational training for the poor and women, appropriate technology for the food processing industry, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, compulsory/voluntary schemes for work safety, and insurance for short-term and casual employment.

³ The Vietnamese term is 'a rice-catcher'.

The only exception is factors relevant to business, particularly the improving investment environment, such as land leases for rural enterprises.

2.4. Process of how the Poor are Identified

“In our village, there are 22 poor households, but the quota is only 10. The village head made the nominations, then brought the list to a meeting for consultation.”
FGD, Nam Sach district

At all PPA sites, government officials from all levels similarly explained the process of how the poor are identified for the poverty alleviation programme. An officer of the CPC organises a survey with the support of the village heads. The commune officer is trained in methods of identification by a district officer, who is in turn trained by a provincial officer. The list of identified poor households is discussed in a meeting with the village party secretary before it is submitted to the commune level. Then the list is passed to the district level for final approval. The list is also communicated to the provincial level for information. As a rule, non-residents are not included in the list. This process is considered participatory and accurate.

Box 4: Quota system in a Village of Nam Trung Commune

In a FGD, the leaders of various village organisations explained that, for 2003, their village was allowed to have six poor households. The heads of village organisations met and worked out a list of ten candidates, who were proposed for a review followed by approval at a village meeting. The community meeting selected six out of these ten candidates and this list was submitted to the CPC for further formal approval. This group of village leaders believed that those who were nominated at the village meeting were among the poorest. If they let it go, the community would have proposed a list of 25% of households in the village, who would all meet the criteria of earning less than VND100,000 per person per month.

Source: FGDs and SSIs

Almost all officers of village institutions and CPCs informed the assessment team of the quota for the number of poor households allowed for a village or commune (see Box 4). This practice poses serious questions about the accuracy of the poor households' list compiled for Programme 135. Similarly, it raises questions about the accuracy of the poverty alleviation programme's measurements of success.

At the household level, villagers confirmed that the process of identification for poor households is conducted twice a year. The village head, in consultation with the party secretary, proposes a tentative list of poor households. This list is further discussed with the broader participation of representatives of village mass organizations. When agreed, this list is submitted to the CPC. In only a few villages did dwellers report that community meetings were held to discuss this list, or that the community then approves it before submitting it to the CPC.

The majority of the consulted poor informed the RPPA team that they did not know how they were selected to be on the list of poor households. Usually the village head told them after their status had already been approved. They agreed with other groups of farmers that this process of selection should be carried out in a village meeting. A positive observation is that all consulted people agreed that the selected people were definitely from poor households.

The poor did not report on how government officials estimate a poor person's income. All that the government officials know is that the income level of VND100,000 per person per month is used as a criteria to assess poverty. It is clear that the list of poor households, at best, is compiled by a consensus of the leaders of village institutions rather than relatively accurate calculation.

Using the participatory wealth ranking method with villagers from all wealth groups, the RPPA found that the list of poor households in almost all villages is much longer than that of the district government. Discussions with officials in communes shows that this is normal, only because the quota for the number of poor household allowed for a village or commune is limited. When the number of health insurance cards is limited, it naturally limits the list of poor households.

The RPPA noticed that the more urbanized a rural community, the closer the result of wealth ranking is to the government list. For example, in urbanised Lien Ha commune the gap is 20%, while in Tho An, a rural commune, this gap is 300%. A very similar picture is observed in the other two districts. This situation could be a result of the fact that poverty in urbanised communities matches the quota more closely, but is much farther apart in rural agricultural communities.

As described earlier, those consulted in all sites agreed that the poor identified by local authorities are rightly poor. However a number of poor households are excluded from the list because of the quota system, as local government officials acknowledge. The quota system was considered reasonable because of the financial limits on health insurance. A suggested area for improvement is that the quota should not be the same for all villages and communes, as the communes are so different in composition and situation.

The poor men and women who were consulted told the RPPA that, when a household is categorised as poor by local authorities, the poor household has access to certain benefits. The list of benefits include health insurance, reduction of school fees and other social contributions, and irregular assistance during festive occasions.

Some of the poor reported on the negative side of being categorised as a poor household. They said that they are aware of their lower status in the community. They are not confident in participating and expressing themselves in village meetings.

From all sites, the heads of village and commune institutions also suggested that the poverty rate should not be 'one for all'. The RPPA team proposes that in addition to a fixed number, allowances should be made for local conditions. As recommended from all sites, the community and the poor should not be excluded from the process of identifying who are the poor. All villagers, leaders of villages and commune officials agreed that the community meeting is the best forum for this exercise.

2.5. Portrait of the Poor

The wealth ranking, SSIs and FGDs conducted in all villages identified food insecurity as a serious outcome of the life of the poor. Consultation with the poor confirmed that food insecurity is a serious concern among the poor in the Red River Delta, a large rice producing area of Vietnam. In Hai Duong, the poor reported food shortages that ranged from three to eight months. In Ha Tay, the food shortage is less severe, reaching up to two months a year for a poor household. Shelters for a poor household are small and weak, of an unsafe construction, and living areas are often shared with an animal barn or kitchen. The poor do not have available savings either in cash or in animals, such as pigs, buffalo or cattle. To address any problems of food or income shortage, or a health problem, they refer to private moneylenders, who charge a high interest.

Box 5: Assets of the Poor

Physical assets

- Lack of household utilities, poor housing, and sanitation facilities

Social assets

- Limited social networks, not beyond family or clan
- Little participation in mass organisations

Human assets

- Poor or low education
- Lack of production skills, imitating others without analysis
- Poor health or nutritional status of the bread-winners of children
- Children lacking access to education as the parents cannot afford education costs or need the children for labour, or there has been mistreatment by teachers
- Too many children to feed as a result of boy preference
- Low entrepreneurship
- Low self-esteem

Financial assets

- Lack of income generation opportunities: only farm income
- Lack of investment capital or access to finance resources

Source: Wealth ranking in My Duc and Nam Sach

Wealth ranking, and other RPPA methods, revealed that all the livelihood assets of the poor are minimal, but the most serious lack is that of human assets (see Box

5). The poor are characterised by having low formal education, limited production skills, poor health and low self-esteem. From a long-term perspective, these families cannot afford to send their children to schools.

The non-economic aspect of poverty is that poor children often cannot finish secondary school (Hai Duong) or primary school (Ha Tay). Describing the poor, all consulted people agree that relationships among the poor do not often extend beyond their village or families clans. Worse-off groups are households headed by a single woman or old age people who are separated from their young adults.

Informants from all three sites indicated to the RPPA team the existence of a small group of the population that falls back into poverty or cannot improve. Those households are affected by one or several negative factors, listed in Box 6.

Box 6: Factors Trapping People in Poverty

- Vulnerability to household disasters: health disasters or serious illness, loss of bread-winners, accidents, investment failure
- Failure of an investment based on bank loans
- Little land resource because the land has been allocated for 20 years; new family members are not eligible for land; hence, household land cannot provide jobs and income for its members
- Bidding system for natural resources (for example, farming land or fish ponds) does not favour the poor as they have no resources for bidding
- Restrictions on petty trade and transport limits income generation opportunities for the poor
- Blocked access to non-farm labour markets: low education, high entry or start-up costs
- Efforts to invest in children's education, which require excessively high costs
- Trapped by social evils
- Low level of skills in production and household economy management

2.6. Recommendations

Identification of the poor

The RPPA team proposes that the process of defining and monitoring poverty should not be equipped with only one single method. Poverty can be defined using three grass-roots practice methods: self-declaration, community wealth ranking and nomination by a committee, in order to set the government quota (?). During this process, community wealth ranking that takes place with the participation of, and representation from, the poor is critical in identifying people for poverty alleviation support. This wealth ranking method should be included in government training programmes for Poverty Alleviation Officers. It is important that this process is public and transparent. The poor must be aware of the benefits available to them as participants of the poverty alleviation programme.

Poverty Reduction Measures

The RPPA team agrees with proposals recommended to the government, by all groups consulted, on measures which would further drive the poverty alleviation process in the coming years. The policy measures proposed include a supported environment for rural businesses and action to address food insecurity.

A supported environment for rural businesses would create local jobs, particularly in the food processing industry. Businesses would create jobs that do not require a high education, which the poor does not have. These jobs would be more financially viable and would be available to women who stay in villages, decreasing the population pressure on cities. Local businesses are calling for help in procuring land for production, establishing and improving financial services, and improving infrastructure that eases their access to markets. Seasonal labourers, in addition, need protection from occupational disasters via an insurance scheme.

Another important policy measure is to address food security for the poor. The improvement of financial services is critical for job creation and for enabling the poor to purchase appropriate inputs for their crops, which would in turn assist them to improve food security. Another measure is that of the agricultural extension system, which can help farmers to diversify their crop income with a shift to cash crops and facilitate land consolidation processes, as well as assist farmers to have better access to market outlets.

Chapter 3: Participation in Local Decision-Making

“Mainly, it is the women in our village who go to meetings, because we, the men, work too far away, and we come home very late and tired. They argue better than us for their rights.” FGD, poor male group

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an assessment of the progress of strengthening democracy at the grassroots level. Special attention is paid to the degree by which poor households can participate in a meaningful way in planning and budgeting processes, in connection to the CPRGS targets of gender equality and empowerment.

This chapter analyses how the Decree on grassroots democracy, including participation at the grassroots, is implemented at various levels of decision-making. It also analyses information flow and the process of decentralisation, and explores how information about local authorities’ activities and the commune’s local budget is disseminated. The Chapter documents whether households have an opportunity to comment on their commune’s plans or raise any questions, as well as how citizens give feedback on the quality of Government services so that services can be made more effective and efficient.

This chapter also discusses the participation of the commune government in commune affairs, which is believed in general to have increased, and citizen’s participation through the representative mechanism. It looks at areas for improvement in local decision-making processes.

3.1. Current Models of Participation in Local Decision Making

The RPPA was informed that awareness and appreciation of the bottom-up planning approach is in place at higher levels of planning, such as district and province levels. All levels of government agreed, with some degree of difference, that the involvement of the CPCs in planning processes has improved strongly in the last few years. The citizens’ representatives of the People’s Council have also improved their participation in the process of planning local socio-economic development.

Analysis at the District Level

In planning commune socio-economic development, the RPPA found that the district government and commune government are in conflict. In the three districts, the DPC complained about the CPC’s lack of knowledge about the local situation, particularly in the areas of population, trade and service. Because of this poor information base, the DPC does not trust that the plans proposed by the CPC are realistic. The DPC believes that the CPCs need to improve their capacity for

data-collection, maintaining databases and utilizing the information for better budgeting practices. The DPC feels that it is important to provide training in collecting and processing socio-economic data and in planning for government staff at all levels.

Analysis at the Commune Level

The FGDs and SSIs at the commune level revealed some areas for improvement in the planning process. Analysis of the CPCs' staff shows that budget allocations, and the timing for the provision of information on approved budgets, should be reviewed. However, the RPPA also found that there is a perception that the current practice does not encourage commune or district governments to promote the involvement of citizens' participation.

The CPCs' leaders expressed the view that the current level of funding for public activities for a commune is insufficient to cover their basic needs. The CPCs are dissatisfied with the way collected tax is distributed. The largest and most easily collectable tax sources (formal and large taxpayers) go to the DPC, while the CPCs are only allowed taxes from small and informal businesses that are more difficult to collect. The CPCs also recommend abolishing the rule that refunds 50% of the funds mobilised from the community when the government invests in rural infrastructure. According to them, this practice is not in line with budget law.

As reported by the CPCs, information on available budgets, particularly for investment in local infrastructure, is provided too late. Very often, this information is known to the CPCs only in the second quarter of the year, or later. Therefore, the CPCs cannot plan their total annual budget well in advance. The CPCs told the RPPA that there are no clear rules about deadlines for budget announcements. There is a belief that the CPC should work 'under the table' in order to get their budget through.

All visited CPCs reported that the current annual planning system in villages and communes does not require input from the local population. Consultation with villagers is only required when inputs such as cash or in-kind donations are needed. Hence, there are no incentives or mechanisms for local government to consult with the population.

Citizen analysis

Primarily, direct participation of villagers happens only at the village level. Villagers are only interested in those decisions that relate to their financial or in-kind contributions. A farmer of Tho An commune clearly explained to the RPPA team: "We are not interested in commune budgets, unless it asks us to contribute. We cannot discuss the tax issues because we cannot change them. What we should do is discuss village plans and activities. An example can be a specific plan for an activity in our village, such as a village road, village irrigation, land distribution, or collecting donations for victims of flood or disaster."

Table 6: Planning Process in Dan Phuong District

Activity	Date	Responsible authority
1. Drafting socio-economic development plan	Oct	Province Department of Planning and Investment (DPI)
2. Management review of the drafted plan	Nov	DPI
3. Drafted plan submitted to PPC for review	Dec	DPI, PPC
4. Approved plan by PPC. Plan broken down and transferred to DPC	Jan	DPI, PPC
5. Provincial authorities (departments) allocate plan and budget to district divisions	Feb-Mar	DPI District divisions
6. District PC revises its plan and submits to district people's council for approval	Apr-May	DPI District divisions
Draft plan review	Apr-May	District divisions, CPCs
Revised plan submitted to DPI for final approval	May-Jun	DPI District divisions
Planning and budgeting	July	Accountant, commune people's council, village heads
Draft plan submitted to CPC	Aug	Commune finance officer, CPC, People's Council
Commune review	Sep	CPC, People's council
Plan submitted to district government	Sep	Commune finance officer, DPI
Commune plan approved, plan announcement to division, villages	Jan	DPI, CPC, People's Council
Announcement to public		CPC, village heads

Source: FGDs

The extent to which people know about planning processes, what they discuss and what they control depends on their access to planning information. Discussions with representatives of all groups in Dan Phuong district clearly indicates that villagers have limited information about the planning process, and have no opportunities to discuss or control it. In a FGD, the villagers told the RPPA team that major sources of information about local development efforts are public loudspeakers or announcement boards, which are decreasing in number. One-way communication in village meetings is driving away the villagers' interest. For example, in Tay Son village of Tho An commune, groups of farmers explained that the village meeting occurs only once a year and is boring. All messages are made via the village announcement board.

The RPPA has identified cases where Decree 29 has empowered local villagers to a level that causes conflicts of interest between villagers and the commune government. In all three districts, the assessment team was told about cases where the will of the villagers was not honoured, and where the villagers then became frustrated with the CPC.

Box 7: A loss-loss Situation

In 2002, following several unsuccessful talks, a CPC in Nam Sach District confiscated electric fans from those families in a village who had decided not to pay cash contributions for irrigation canals under a government-funded project. After a lot of complaints and negotiations, the CPC returned these assets to the villagers, but both sides felt frustrated. In this village, the majority of the households did not agree with the CPC on the decision to build the irrigation canals in the first place. To them, the priority should have been given to on-the-field roads, which are more important for transporting farm inputs and products, although both constructions were beneficial to the village. A villager said: "Our participation is not meaningful if the government does not listen to us."

Source: FGDs

3.2 Forthcoming changes in Status of the Officials of the CPC

"We hope that when the commune officials have permanent salaries, they will be more responsible and more helpful to people." Group of villagers, Nam Sach district

In all visited communes and villages, the change in status of CPC officials to full civil servants is yet to be implemented. It is not yet known whether this change in status, in both its positive and negative aspects, will influence the way that commune authorities interact with local people. However, interviewed officials of the CPCs predicted that the change will more than likely improve interactions with citizens in general and with poor households.

Interviews with officials of the CPC revealed that this change is very much welcomed by local government staff. The most frequently repeated reasons are that:

- staff will be specialised and, as a result, they will have an improved capacity to perform their duties and make the commune government more efficient;
- staff will have job security as formal government officials and a relevant benefit package; and
- as a formal part of the government machine, they will be better appreciated by the citizens.

Villagers in three districts are positive about the change in status of commune officials. Firstly, they think the government will make sure that the officials have a good income and therefore the citizens will not have to 'feed' these civil servants. Secondly, the officials will be able to focus on their responsibilities and be more effective. However, villagers also expressed concerns about officials becoming more bureaucratic and more removed from villagers.

3.3. Grass Roots Democracy at the Commune Level

Points from the Government Side

The impact of the Decree

Factors that influence the implementation of Decree 29 at the commune level are, firstly, an awareness of the positive impacts by all government officers. The Decree brings about numerous benefits.

Since its implementation, the most important observation was that there has been an improved resource mobilisation from the community. More ideas, and monetary and in-kind inputs, were contributed to public works that implement local development plans, especially in building local infrastructure. As a result, the efficiency and effectiveness of local infrastructure development plans was increased.

Other benefits were seen in improved relations between government (staff/officers) and citizens, and in the empowerment of citizens, as knowledge on their rights and responsibilities increased. Government officers observed that citizens' complaints and conflicts have strongly decreased, thus improving social stability. Empowerment of the citizens has forced government staff and officers to be 'cleaner', meaning that there is less corruption.

In Hai Duong province, as a possible negative impact of Decree 29, officials mentioned the potential abuse of democracy through making unnecessary 'noises' and complaints. Specifically, reference was made to cases where there was conflict in making decisions about what kind of infrastructure should be prioritised, and where some of the villages refused to contribute their matching fund.

Potential for promoting Decree 29

Government officials and leaders of mass organisations in all communes and districts pointed to weak and unsystematic activities that are used to maintain awareness of the Decree. They found that the current practice of launching the Decree as a 'once-off', without re-training or reminders, is not encouraging of a high level of citizen participation. This has occurred because limited resources and funding were available for the Decree's implementation and for maintaining activities that are required by the Decree, such as the distribution of information material.

Village heads pointed to the lack of village facilities as a constraint to communicating and maintaining the messages of the Decree. They often referred to the fact that community houses, where villagers meet and discuss village matters, are not available in many villages. The villages do not have the resources to construct this facility. Their community communication channels (the village loudspeaker system, for example) are weak and have limited funding.

The CPC made a general statement about internal conflicts between the Decree and other regulations when using the Decree in daily life. They also made points about confusion among themselves, the members of the People's Councils and citizens on direct and indirect democracy. The CPC was unclear what should be reported to the People's Council, and what power this body has.

Village and commune government officials are well aware of the conflict of interest and priorities among villagers, which constrains their participation. One factor is the higher mobility of the labour force, where many new types of income generation activities (IGA), such as selling labour, require people to move away from their communities. More importantly, villagers give higher priority to income generation activities above civic participation or discussion with government officials. In one location, the head of village production teams noted that there is a missing level, representing government and citizens. For example, in Te Tieu Commune, the position of the village head was not filled. The heads of production teams take on various functions of the village head, but they do not feel that the functions are their responsibility.

Perception of the citizens

Low motivation by the village heads was identified as a potential area for improving the impact of grass roots democracy. While not all village heads complain about the incentives available to them, the villagers, often those who are non-poor, made points about the low level of incentive for village heads. They emphasised the role of the village heads as people at the front lines of the interface between government and citizens. These semi-formal and multi-functional government staff, elected by the community, are underpaid at VND90,000 per month, poorly trained and over-loaded with work.

Consultation in all villages revealed that village and commune political systems could have a strong role in promoting democracy. When the Decree was introduced, village and commune mass organisations were very active channels for communicating its contents. Mass organisations at these two levels believed that their responsibility was to make the government hear the voice of citizens, poor men and women included, and to recognise their needs. However, SSIs with these institutions show that these organisations are weak, having neither a clear agenda nor programmes. Many village WUs meet only once a year, for example to celebrate Women's Day.

While village mass organisations and village heads know most of the administrative and political positions in their commune and village well, the knowledge of local citizens appears incomplete. This is a limiting factor, constraining their access to, and ability to contact, officers of the commune government and politicians. In the main, men in a village can name people who hold three positions, such as the chairperson of the CPC, the party secretary, or the commune police officer. However, they are not able to clearly describe the

roles and functions of these positions. The women in villages, and people from poor groups, know the positions in villages well. In addition, women can identify the chairperson of the CPC. Similar to men in the villages, this group does not clearly understand the role and function of these titles.

Measuring and monitoring grassroots democracy

Government officials at all levels, and villagers in all visited villages, informed the assessment team that, when the Decree was communicated to the population, community meetings were organised. There was a high attendance of the local population, ranging from 60% to 90%. The Decree document was made available to all government officials and to village heads. However, as this was a one-time activity, interest has been decreasing. The leaders of village institutions are concerned that many young citizens are not aware of the decree. They think that there is a strong interest by the population in how their representatives, and they themselves, could monitor or supervise local government and local government plans.

Based on previous positive experience at the start of the Decree, the Assessment team proposes that indicators for monitoring the Decree's implementation can be:

- attendance at public meetings;
- questions/comments/complaints made or raised to governments or their representatives (People's Council) by people, particularly poor women;
- frequency of people reading or borrowing the Decree for reference;
- reference made to the Decree by local people;
- communication sessions or the frequency of interaction of the People's Council with the community; and
- initiatives/community projects proposed by local people for funding from government or other agencies or carried out by themselves (with or without mass organisations).

3.4 Recommendations

The research team would like to join government officers at all levels in proposing measures for improving the communication of the Decree's message to the population, the interaction between the People's Councils with citizens, and the empowerment of the village head.

It is important to review the Decree and iron out conflicts between the Decree and other regulations. For communication and education, all mass organisations, particularly commune and village organisations, should be mobilised and have their skills strengthened in order to more effectively communicate the Decree to villagers.

In addition to the activities of mass organisations, community meetings as a means of interactive communication should be encouraged to ensure a better acceptance and dialogue between government representatives and citizens. The higher frequency of these meetings would also mean a better chance for acceptance of proposals and for reaching the intended audience. Specifically, the frequency of community meetings should be increased from semi-annual to quarterly. Interaction between representatives of the People's Councils and citizens should focus on improving existing systems of communication. At the meetings, representation of women, low-income earners and other poorer groups should be considered and ensured.

The RPPA team would like to convey a message from villagers and village heads themselves that, in general, village authority should be delegated more decision-making power. It is time to consider what decisions can be made at the village level and the conditions in which they can be made. At least in the Red River Delta region, policy for constructing government systems should consider whether village heads can mobilise and utilise funds from the community for development projects in their community or villages. Further, government budgets should allocate certain financial resources to village heads in order for them to carry out activities in villages. The budget should ensure an improved incentive scheme for village heads. With more decision making power delegated, the community facility, for example the meeting hall, should be secured, and training for village heads and his/her colleagues in village mass organisations should be considered essential.

Chapter 4: Delivering Basic Services to Poor People

This Chapter aims to assess service delivery mechanisms to citizens, focusing on the rural poor in the area of education, health care and extension. It also attempts to assess challenges in the delivery of these services, focusing on how poor households interact with service providers, and on how poor households can be empowered to claim their rights to basic services more effectively. The Chapter is connected to the CPRGS targets of education universalisation and quality improvement, reduction of the birth rate, child mortality rate and child malnutrition rate, and improving preventive health care facilities.

As a general note, the RPPA team found that the poor are eligible for formal benefits provided by the government. This benefit provokes other informal benefits provided by the community.

Formal services/benefits include subsidised credit offered by the Social Policy Banks, free health insurance card, reduction of school fees (50%) for their children in secondary schools⁴, and exemption from other taxes for housing, land and public labour. The poor are also eligible for informal benefits, such as exemption of fees for irrigation and waste collection, and for services, including gifts for their schoolchildren at the start of the school year, gifts at festive occasions, gift and affection visits by local mass organisations and ‘affection’ housing. The latter is rare, particularly if the family is not a beneficiary of a programme for war invalids or KIA.

4.1 Education

“About one third of students dropped out after secondary school, because their family could not afford the cost of education” Group of poor women, My Duc District

The Government of Vietnam predicts important changes in the field of education. The most important is the Education For All Action Plan (EFA). The EFA provides targets aimed at improving the delivery of schooling on all levels, and important improvements in the fields of adult and non-formal education, and in lifelong learning. The Provisional Regulation on Fundamental Quality Levels states some broad intentions on improving the quality of schooling, mainly through better interaction between schools and communities, and more involvement of the latter in school management. This section of the report tries to assess how these policies are implemented, and factors which would assist in meeting government goals in the provision of education services. As in Hai

⁴ The fee for primary schools is exempted for all.

Duong and Ha Tay provinces, the problem of adult illiteracy is insignificant, and the report will not discuss the government goals of eradicating adult female illiteracy as well as actions proposed to meet these goals.

General Improvement in the Education Sector

In Nam Sach, as in other visited districts, the general picture for education depicted by education officials is largely a success story of the programme 'Education for All'. In pre-schools, enrolment of pupils from the age of four to five years has increased, reaching almost 100%. That of primary schools is also almost 100%. Education officials reported that by removing education fees for primary education and reducing school fees, the poor have more opportunities for a better education. The awareness of the role of education in poverty alleviation is high. A Parent-Teacher Association operates in every school.

During consultations on promoting factors for education, non-poor groups attributed improvements in education to upgraded school facilities, the increased quality in teaching from teachers who are not pressured by job offers from industry, and the need for pre-school education for entry to primary school. In rural areas, the parents of schoolchildren appreciate appropriate staffing and the high quality of teaching staff, who are young and well educated. More importantly to the villagers, school classes are conducted in the villages, allowing small children to conveniently travel to their classes. Villagers in Ha Tay province also praised the boarding classes, which free parents, especially mothers, from the duties of taking care of small children during the second school shift.

Among non-school factors, the villagers referred to the pressure on improving education that comes from new job opportunities. Local industrial enterprises and labour export in all three districts of Ha Tay and Hai Duong prioritise higher education (secondary). In My Duc district, villagers reported that the rule of 'no pre-school, no primary education' pushes parents to send their children to preschool classes.

Trend of Early School Dropout

According to the results of a number of FGDs with poor and non-poor, as well as village leaders, primary education has improved as a result of economic advances; there is almost no dropout at this level. However, the pattern of dropping-out is more apparent, and not in favour of the poor, in secondary or higher education.

The villagers and village heads agreed that early dropout is common among poor households. In Nam Sach, the children of the poor leave school before reaching Grade 10, while in Ha Tay they leave school after finishing primary school. In Hai Duong, early drop out is more common in urban towns than in villages, a pattern opposite to that observed in Ha Tay. In all three districts, villagers declared that the number of students from their communities entering

universities is decreasing because of its high costs and because of the low educational quality of students in comparison to university requirements. A group of male and female villagers of My Duc district considered these two factors to be equally important.

Education Economy

An important factor constraining children of poor households to continue their education is the high cost of education, which is not affordable for this group. A poor woman in Nam Sach put this her way: “They removed the school fee, but they created a lot of other fees”. She carefully counted and gave a list of some 30 different types of fees or payments to be made by a student. However, the most common costs described by parents include schooling fees, extra classes or *hoc them*, text books, note books, school maintenance, membership fees for parent-teacher associations, class funds, fees for portable water, parking fees for bicycles, health insurance, examination fees, and the school dental programme. For the poor, parents mentioned that the high non-monetary cost of obtaining the certificate for school fee exemption from the commune and district governments drives them away from the benefits offered to them.

The major cost for education is the fee for extra classes. The RPPA team found this is a serious concern among parents in rural communities. In regards to this service, opinions vary among different groups. Schoolteachers considered this to be a voluntary action supported by parents, although formally the government has discouraged these extra classes.

The parents of wealthy groups look at extra classes as a help for ‘weak’ students. This exercises collective pressure on parents and has an ‘imitation’ effect. Many parents told the assessment team that they simply follow others in sending their children to extra classes. Some parents see teachers as part of a power system. They send children to extra classes as a way to address the ‘need to please the teachers to avoid problems for our kids’.

For many poor households, the cost of textbooks, at a level of some VND100,000, is too high. They suggested developing and using the school libraries more effectively to specifically assist students from poor families. Some suggested further reducing the price of the textbooks.

According to analysis by poor parents, the high cost of education is on a persistent rise. First, the cost of the education problem of *hoc them* persists. Second, a number of education levels are fully or semi-privatised, such as the pre-school system that is fully supported by citizens. The school ‘contribution’ fees are rising. The cost of education increases as the education level goes up. Current education reforms, with frequent changes in textbooks, have made the library collection ineffective, and of no help to the poor.

All the consulted poor households agreed that the aggregated schooling costs are too much for poor households to afford⁵. In SSIs, two of four women, from the poor economic group the RPPA team met in a village of Nam Sach, said that the school expelled their children because they could not pay the school fee. The other two women said that they stopped sending their children to schools because they could not pay the school fee.

Table 7: Education Cost Schedule

Type of fee	Amount	Exemption and reduction
Schooling fee to be paid semi-annually	Primary: None Secondary, and tertiary: as set by the government	50% reduction for poor families and war invalids
School maintenance annual fee	Primary: VND20,000 Secondary: VND25,000 Tertiary: VND30,000	50% reduction for poor families and war invalids
PTA annual fee	Primary: VND20,000 Secondary: VND25,000 Tertiary: VND30,000	50% reduction for poor families and war invalids
Monthly extra class fee per subject	Primary: VND20,000 Secondary: VND30-40,000 Tertiary: VND50,000	None

Source: SSIs in Nam Sach District

Poverty as a Global Constraining Factor to Education

At a higher level, schoolteachers and parents indicated that overall poverty is the major factor limiting the ability of a household to cover education costs. As a result of poverty, parents are much too occupied with income generation, thus caring less about the children's education. Under the pressure of poverty, households need child labour for income generation or caretakers for smaller children to free their parents for work. Education is disrupted also as a consequence of 'family disasters', such as divorce and parents' conflicts, which are also attributed to poverty. Lastly, when conflict arises between expenditure for production and education, the production always wins, leaving lower priorities for education.

To the assessment team, the question of whether education will be affordable for the poor in coming years has no clear answer. It depends on a balance between the household economy and the economy of education. On one hand, overall economic improvement would allow the poor to have more income. On the other hand, the cost of education is on the rise.

⁵ In Hai Duong, the RPPA found families falling to poverty as a result of an effort to secure higher education for their children.

Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)

There has been a strong interest among development workers in the PTA as a civil institution that has the potential to provide positive roles in balancing the school institution, a quite formal and bureaucratic establishment. As a voluntary organisation, a PTA has some elements of civic society organisation, such as being not-for-profit and non-government, and having a democratic leadership. Its leadership and management are formed by free and democratic election.

Consulting with school teaching and administrative staff, it was reported to the RPPA that, in some schools, the PTA functions as a complementary tool of the school system. PTAs provide material incentives to encourage good teachers, assist school staff in busy times, such as during examinations, provide incentives for good students, and assist students of poor families. As all of these functions used to be performed by the school before *Doi Moi*, PTAs sound like an outcome of the process of 'socialisation', meaning passing the costs of public services on to individuals or households.

Although they are supported by PTAs, the school staff reject the idea that the PTA should be able to comment on or evaluate teaching quality, or be involved in class planning. The overall opinion is that parents have no expertise in education, and that this should never be an area where the PTA should have input.

Consultation with parents, especially those coming from poor groups, shows that the elite (or in local language 'power-people') make up the PTA management and leadership. They are usually active or retired government officials or teachers. Parents from the poor group feel that they are incapable of making contributions at PTA meetings, and that they are not the appropriate people to be part of its management. They feel marginalised and unwelcome. In its activities, the PTA has no pro-poor stance, and does not represent the interests of parents from poor groups to the school administration. Normally, PTA leadership decides on fees, fund sizes and other cash compulsory contributions from its members to create funds. However, the poor, as well as other members, have no voice in this process. They feel distant from this institution.

Recommendations

The assessment team would like to join the poor in proposing a *stronger action for pro-poor education promotion*. This action should ensure that the poor be exempted from school fees at all levels. The school library should be in a position to offer free hire of textbooks for students from poor households. Vocational education for students from poor households should be fee-free. Lastly, support to university students from poor households should be ensured, for example by exempting fees for services such as dormitory or tuition fees. To

make the poverty card more effective, the government should ensure that the cards be available to the poor before the school year starts, thus ensuring that, in terms of education, the poor benefit fully from government poverty alleviation policies.

In regard to PTAs, the assessment team proposes to develop a sample charter for PTAs, which would ensure that the PTA becomes a democratic organisation. It is desirable to provide some education for PTA managers on pro-poor values, as well as on guiding the PTAs in representing parents' interest, especially those of poorer parents.

4.2. Health

“The district health insurance services, in co-operation with the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, have given 4,118 health insurance cards to all poor families on the list submitted by the communes”. Dan Phuong Insurance Office

The Government of Vietnam, in Decision 139, plans to provide comprehensive health care to all poor individuals and households in communities classified as poor. This Decision affects both rural and urban poor. This will allow the poor to access ‘state-run medical examinations and treatment establishments from commune health stations to hospitals and institutes at central levels’.

The RPPA team had an unique opportunity to learn how the two different systems of health insurance function in the two provinces. This exposure helped the assessment team to better appreciate the financial efforts (and the political will that came with this) made by the government in improving health services for the poor.

Case of Ha Tay: the Reform is yet to Happen

“Interviewing 24 households in Dan Phuong, five told the survey that they have health insurance cards for the poor.” A surveyor

Government officers declared that all poor households were given health insurance cards. The poor said that this was not the case. For example, in a village of Lien Ha commune of Dan Phuong, only five out of an identified ten poor households were given health insurance cards. In My Duc district, households reported that they were nominated as eligible for health cards and had submitted their photographs, but the cards had not arrived as yet.

Villagers in another community of Dan Phuong explained that only one third of the poor are nominated for health insurance cards. A positive point they made is that families with old age or sick people are prioritised. In a meeting in the field, among 20 participants consulted from the poor group in this village, only one person reported using the actual benefits of her health card. Others had not

been using their card, although some have sick family members. In all districts in Ha Tay, the RPPA team observed that health insurance cards were delivered to the commune but were not further distributed. Villagers were not informed that their cards were available. For instance, in Te Tieu commune, 15 households had not come to pick up their health insurance cards by the time of the team's visit. In other villages of Dan Phuong, the poor were given health cards when the team was on site.

Government health officials gave two reasons why the cards were given out so late. These include the merging of the health and social insurance systems, which has not yet been completed, and the delay in formulating and transferring the list of poor households to higher levels, meaning the health cards were not prepared in the early months of the year.

Case of Hai Duong: Health insurance reform

Health insurance cards have been in place since 1999. Since 2002, health insurance has shifted from providing health insurance cards for poor households to a system that provides a card for each member of a poor household. The government reported an increased value for the new card of VND50,000 compared to VND30,000.

In addition, government funding for this programme has increased. In 2003, this scheme cost the government VND7 billion, of which the government covered 70% and the remainder was covered by local communities and mass organisations. An insurance company reimburses actual health treatment costs occurring in a hospital. During discussions with villagers from various groups, it became clear that the process for evaluating eligibility for the insurance cards is lacking in transparency. The poor only know the results of the selection process when they are given the cards; other villagers from other groups do not know who is selected or when they receive the cards. However the villagers found that it was the poor people who have been given health insurance cards, and not people from better-off households.

Similar to choosing poor households, this process suffers from very limited participation by the community. The evaluation of who should be given an insurance card is carried out among the village leadership and management at the village and commune level. A limited quota also exists for the number of insurance cards, based on the quota for the number of poor households in a village. Many poor households do not qualify for health insurance cards because of this quota.

Health Insurance cards in Use

The value of the health insurance cards varies among poor people. The majority of the people consulted had not had a chance to use it. For some it greatly

reduces health treatment costs, assisting the household to maintain their food security.

A number of poor groups discussed the usefulness of the health card. The overall conclusion is that, in their opinion, the set ceiling for medication constrains effective treatment. Their experience tells them that, by using the health card, they are treated like 'second-class' citizens, reflected in the quality of care and medications offered to them. Some representatives of poor households told the assessment team that they did not use the health card at all for this reason. Another constraint to using the card is that they are not aware of how the cards can be used: where, how, for how long and what medications are allowed.

On the need for 'envelopes' given to medical staff, the opinions of the villagers vary. For some with health insurance, the patient can be given inhumane treatment or care unless an 'envelope' is given. In contrast, some reported that health staff treated them well without extra cash incentives. For some people from poor households, their treatment has been equal to that of any other patient.

Weighing up the various health establishments, the poor concluded that the commune health station gives them the best and most humane treatment. The higher the level of the health establishment, the more the 'envelope' culture persists. However, in all districts, the CHCs are not well staffed or equipped, and available drugs are limited.

Discussing health services for the poor, the assessment of government health officials varies. To some, all patients are treated equally, regardless of whether they are poor or government officials. Some non-health officials acknowledged that, because the non-poor give 'envelopes' to the health staff for a better service, the practice of giving 'envelopes' by the poor is a natural part of 'hospital culture'.

The health staff of the CHCs argue that the set ceiling for medication forces the commune health station to refer their patients to hospitals at higher levels, where the costs for treatment and hospitalisation are much higher. They reported that their capacity is under-utilised.

Areas for Improvement

Based on the findings, the assessment team proposes to improve the transparency and participation of the process of selecting beneficiaries for health insurance cards, thus strengthening citizen monitoring and supervision over this process. The team suggests that commune and village governments should ensure that citizens know who is eligible for this public service, why they are eligible and how they can access the service. The information on what health services are provided free by the health insurance cards should be made

available in public places in health establishments, or printed right on the health card.

Another measure to improve the transparency of the health system could be clients' evaluation, which plays the role of public monitor. This system would help to ensure that the 'envelope' culture does not affect poor clients when they use their insurance cards.

As discussed in the section on poverty perception, the team proposes assessing the quota system for poor households in a community, thus removing the quota for the health insurance cards. Similarly, the team proposes to remove the quota system for medication at the commune health clinics, and focus on building service capacity for this level of health care. This will help to reduce costs for health checks and treatments for citizens, especially the poor.

4.3. Agricultural Extension

"We like the extension training because of its helpful knowledge on animal and crop production. We would attend the training without being paid". FGD, Poor women

The government and concerned ministries are in the process of reviewing Decision 13, which is concerned with the provision of extension services. This section explores how this important service is delivered to rural populations with the intention of feeding its knowledge directly into the revision process.

Extension Systems

In both provinces, extension systems are provided to the commune level and are well established. In the visited province of Hai Duong, extension services have an administrative structure that includes a head office, district branches and commune affiliation. The province office is staffed by 16 people, while in each district the extension service office is staffed by two to three people. In communes, there is an extension worker, who cooperates with other veterinary and pest control officers. This system allows for the hire of additional qualified short or long-term labour for specific needs. A similar system is reported in Ha Tay.

In Ha Tay, the province extension service expanded to 23 staff in 2003, from 16 in 1999. Two staff hold post-graduate degrees. At the district level, the extension office is staffed by one person more than that of the Hai Duong office. The extension office is well equipped with training materials. At the commune level, in Ha Tay, the research team found that there was one extension worker per commune.

The needs of the Poor

All wealth ranking and group discussions conducted by the RPPA show that the poor are strongly dependent on crop production. They are considered to be purely agricultural households. For the poor, food security is yet to be achieved. Their animal production techniques are poorly developed and have low productivity. Very often, their animals suffer from diseases, posing a big risk of investment failure. For the poor the most common animal is poultry, farmed on a small scale. Income from animal production is insufficient to supplement any other income used to purchase food.

Among the poor, physical assets are few and indebtedness is high. Their overall income is insufficient to cover basic needs. Their social networks are limited to 'not beyond their clan and a few neighbours'. As a result, the chance for success of the farmer-to-farmer approach is limited.

FGDs indicate that, like all other farmers, the poor in theory currently benefit from access to HYV seeds for food crops, vaccinations for dogs and ruminants, and information on pest control. These services are the same extension services offered to all farmers. However, the current costs of HYV crops (seeds, fertiliser) and animals promoted by the extension service are expensive, far beyond the capacity of a poor household with limited resources.

There are a number of impediments that constrain access by the poor to extension services. The poor are too occupied with income generation activities which they rely on for their survival. They give little priority to available extension supports. Like many other farmers, the poor do not know who the local extension workers are, thus they have much less opportunity to access available services and advice.

In agricultural households, the poor have a general need for extension services, like other non-poor groups. This includes services for pest control, crop timing, water control or new HYVs. However, the services must be offered within the context of resource-scarce households.

Needs of the Non-poor Group for Extension Services

In contrast, non-poor and local cadres (in Ha Tay, for example) are well informed about trial plots, demonstration plots, training in intensive farming techniques, IPM training, training for fruit tree crops, silk worms, raising fish and exposure trips to dairy farms. They expressed that they need training and further knowledge about pest control and the need for quality pesticides, and they need quality advice on how to use pesticides effectively. The non-poor group of farmers further expressed a need to learn techniques to raise cash crops, such as papayas, soybeans, fruit trees or hybrid pigs, and a need for more market information.

The farmers from this non-poor group were concerned about the quality of the extension advice. Inaccurate messages and advice can threaten their livelihood because they have the capacity to bring about losses for farmers. Furthermore, technical advice, even when it is of good quality, is not often sufficient, for example, if the output or produce has no market, as was experienced when the extension services promoted mushrooms and silkworm mulberries in Ha Tay.

Meeting the needs

In the view of local extension officials, services are under-resourced to the extent that programs cannot be implemented. Technical staff have limited experience and are not yet trained in extension techniques and methods. Staff training mainly focuses on theory, and is far from being practical enough.

Extension service staff also acknowledge that they have no special knowledge or skills by which they can work with and for the poor, although they acknowledge the challenges in working with the poor. According to the extension workers of Nam Sach district, the poor are 'inferior' and do not trust extension advice. Staff also agreed that they are poorly skilled in extension training methods, and in evaluating the impact of extension training.

Box 7: Extension Services in Nam Sach District

The district extension centre has two workers, who spread out over the region in order to service 23 communes. The district extension service cooperates with the national research institute under a technical cooperation programme funded by international agencies.

Technical training is the most important service provided by the extension services. Annually, the centre offers some 70 extension training sessions with an available amount of VND70,000 for one training session. The district extension service claims that its service is demand-led, meeting the needs of the farmers. The centre told the assessment team that 80% of its training is based on the needs of the farmers.

Cooperating well with mass organisations and key farmers, the extension services consider their most important success is in creating Farmers' Interest Groups, which are a mechanism for spreading technical knowledge. The staff of the extension service demonstrate clearly that their programme does not differentiate on the basis of the needs of women and the poor.

Source: SSI

Consultation with the staff of extension services in all three districts indicates that they do not have the responsibility or mandate to assist farmers with access to markets, or to assist with risks associated with price fluctuation. Moreover, the extension service has no responsibility to assist the poor as a special group. The example in Box 7 illustrates the attitudinal issues of the extension services: gender-blindness and insensitiveness to the needs of the poor [??].

Area for Improvement

While the education and health systems clearly have components or activities directed to assist the poor, it sounds illogical that the agricultural extension system functions without a poverty orientation. The RPPA team would like to echo the recommendations made by the poor and their supporters, such as other wealth groups, leaders of villages and commune institutions. Firstly, the agricultural extension system should have programmes which address the special needs of the poor and which considers the context of their livelihood and assets.

Secondly, as it is well known that women are the key people responsible for agricultural production, the extension programme should involve women in all of its activities. Access by the poor and women to the services offered by the agricultural extension system is proposed in order to monitor the success of this policy effort. Lastly, it is recommended that adequate human, financial, and technical resources are provided to the extension system, in order to support these policy measures.

Chapter 5: Targeted Social Assistance Programme

This chapter looks into the current mechanisms for delivery of social assistance, particularly to the targeting problem, and how these mechanisms might be improved. It is relevant to the CPRGS targets of reducing vulnerability and strengthening safety nets, developing strategies for natural disaster mitigation, and keeping the impact of halving the rate of people pushed back into poverty by natural disasters and other risks by 2010. The chapter intends to explore how the government's intention to improve the capacity of the whole population to manage and cope with risks through social security schemes will be realised, and also in what way the government provides relief in case of emergency and sudden risks to poor people.

5.1. Overview of the Social Assistance

Government bodies responsible for social assistance reported on the increasing need for social support, and the limited capacity of the government to address this need. The DOLISA in Hai Duong informed the RPPA team about its 2002 programme, which provided vocational training for 16,000 people, of whom 867 people were people with disabilities. Some INGOs⁶ offered wheelchairs and free health checks for 435 of these people, donated 20 hearing support devices, and covered the costs for plastic operations for 80 people. In the province there are 7,212 older aged people, orphans or people with disabilities who receive the regular allowance, and 23,760 people who need once-off help at *Tet*⁷. The province helped 117 families with affection houses (*nha tinh thuong*). According to government officials, the scale of this assistance has increased by five times at least since 1996. The government is only able to cover about half of those who are needy.

The DPC in Nam Sach district informed the team that in their district, 647 people are beneficiaries of the regular support programme, which offers a monthly allowance of VND55,000 to someone who either has a disability, is an orphan or is old aged. Hundreds of people obtained irregular grants during disasters and floods, or during pre-harvest or pre-*Tet* food shortages. The level of irregular support varies and might range from VND50,000 to VND500,000. In Nam Sach town, among the 70 beneficiaries of irregular support in 2002, only 3 people with special circumstances were given a grant of VND 500,000. All others were assisted at a level of VND50,000.

⁶ One of the INGOs was identified as the Vietnam Assistance for Handicapped.

⁷ Vietnamese Lunar New Year Holidays.

5.2. Beneficiaries and the Support

In various FGDs in all commune and village sites, the assessment team found that formal social targeting assistance mainly includes regular allowances and irregular gifts at festive occasions. The first group of people eligible for these benefits are people with disabilities, invalids, old age people, orphans, people affected by dioxin (orange agent), or people with mental problems. People who cannot support themselves are eligible for formal social support when they cannot refer to any direct family members for assistance. The other special group of people who are beneficiaries of this programme includes war martyrs, war invalids and families of those Killed in Action (KIA). This group's benefits include a regular allowance and other benefits, similar to those of the poor. This information is the same as that given to the team by the officers responsible for social assistance and welfare.

It appears that the poor, and people in difficulties or vulnerable situations, have little idea about how and where they can get support. In all four visited villages of Dan Phuong, the poor and other villagers confirmed that, except in the case of regular assistance to people who could not help themselves, there is no incidental or accident assistance schemes. The villagers observed that people who experience accidents do not receive assistance from the government. The only possible support is arranged by local mass organisations. In Nam Sach, it is unclear to the poor and those who suffer from accidents or disasters how to claim for assistance. The RPPA team consulted with two women and a man who reported that they could not help themselves but that they have not been helped by the government, although they reported their cases to village authorities. Three others were helped but they were identified by village and commune mass organisations.

5.3. Process of Identification and the Support

Identification

As explained to the RPPA team in Nam Sach, the process of identification starts with the leaders of village mass organisations informing government bodies at a higher level. These cases will be verified and, if approved, the concerned families will be informed. These steps do not involve the community or the people concerned, until they are contacted for verification. Some people who could not help themselves believed that, if they were eligible, the commune government would automatically bring assistance to them. In general, the local residents agreed that the people assisted are rightfully selected, although none of them knew what criteria the government had used to identify these beneficiaries.

In the visited villages, the poor households reported that the village head delivered the poverty book to them just the day before the RPPA team's visit. They did not know what benefits they were eligible for. The people who were

given assistance considered the assistance to be luck, and they did not make any inquiries about its origin.

The provincial government of Hai Duong is aware of the need to disseminate information to its citizens. In the province, there is a project to establish a community information centre in communes, where mass organisations and the commune government could provide information and advice to citizens.

Formal Support

Beneficiaries of the targeted programme explained that they received a monthly allowance of VND50,000 to VND55,000 per person from the government. In addition, they received irregular gifts from the commune government on festive days, such as the lunar new year. An irregular grant can also be provided for funeral costs. The amount of the grant is VND500,000, equal to the cost of a coffin.

In Dan Phuong, for example, villagers reported that at *Tet* the poor receive some VND50,000. Some people in special difficulties might be assisted by local mass organisations. Villagers in one village explained that three out of 11 people in special difficulties receive a monthly allowance of VND45,000. The children of the poor are given in-kind gifts in the form of textbooks or notebooks. The poor are exempted from the village fee for waste collection. A poor woman told the RPPA team she is exempted from a number of fees, such as the labour tax⁸, irrigation fees, field protection fees and various donations for disasters.

Similar to the support to the poor, this formal assistance triggers informal community support from mass organisations and other community organisations. The beneficiaries of this programme were assisted with gifts when the person became ill, donations for an affection house, or donations to support the education of orphans.

5.4 Analysis

Government

Government officials at all levels of the RPPA team consider the social assistance programme to be large, practical and appropriately targeted to those who are needy. But they are not yet able to help poor people to maintain their daily life. The support is equal to only half of that required for a person to live above the poverty line. A number of government officers agree that an adequate amount for the monthly allowance should start at VND100,000⁹ which would at least significantly complement other income sources of the poor.

⁸ Labour tax is a tax levied on citizens who are labourers until the age of 28. Women are exempted from this tax before this age when they get married.

⁹ Some suggested a monthly amount of VND70,000 per person.

The affection housing scheme (*nha tinh thuong*) is effective as the value of a house is considerable, but only a few special people are supported by this programme (see Box 8). Normally old parents of one or several KIAs would be the beneficiaries of this scheme. In addition, an important part of the funding for this programme is raised from community or businesses, while the government funds only part of the cost.

Box 8: Housing for the Poor

A housing program for the poor has been implemented in Hai Duong since 2001 under the logo 'no houses with thatched roofs and muddy wall for the poor'. Since that year, more than 1,000 houses were built or repaired for poor households. According to the most current estimate, there are 3,000 houses with thatched roofs and muddy walls existing in villages. The programme target is to make improvements to all of these houses by 2005. The cost of the support for a new house is VND8.7 million, of which VND5 million came from the district government budget. The remainder is to be mobilised and matched by the community, which includes the family and its clan, and the village. The support for repairing a house is VND4 million with a similar matching arrangement. According to the FGDs with government officers, this programme is strongly supported by communities.

Source: FGDs with province officials

The national and provincial governments are the main source of funding for assistance to people who cannot help themselves. Other minor sources of funding are local businesses, mass organisations, and the local and international community¹⁰. The responsible government department stated that this support needs a high budget, but the available resources can only cover 50% of the needs, while mobilisation from the population and businesses is too little.

The poor and beneficiaries of this programme are grateful for the assistance, and appreciate the contributions this support makes to maintaining their life and meeting their basic needs. The leaders of villages and village mass organisations hold the same opinion.

In various group discussions, government officers identified the disbursement frequency as an issue for improvement. Currently, the monthly allowance is released quarterly, which is convenient for the government offices as it reduces the processing time. However, the poor need the cash regularly. They have the potential to fall into debt waiting for the allowance to come.

Furthermore, the current practice is that funds for all regular and emergency supports are controlled at the district level. The commune government identifies

¹⁰ International NGOs identified in Ha Tay are Allianz Mission (Dan Phuong District), and Caritas Switzerland (My Duc District).

and verifies the beneficiaries for this programme and transfers funds from the district to the beneficiaries. To perform these tasks, the commune government cooperates with village authorities and commune mass organisations. This process was considered by the commune government and mass organisations as unnecessarily lengthy, and brings additional inaccuracy as it involves a district level that has limited and out-of-date knowledge about what is happening in the villages. The efficiency of the emergency support was emphasised as a quality indicator for this programme.

During the consultation, in various FGDs, commune and village officials proposed to decentralise decision-making power on these issues to the commune government. The empowered commune authority would make social support programme processes more efficient. The district authority would play the role of providing assurance and improvements to the quality of the implementation. Existing examples of fund management found in various commune mass organisations in Nam Sach district strongly support this proposal. The Association of Veterans of Nam Trung commune is managing two funds. One supports victims of Agent Orange, and the other supports poor members. Representatives of mass organisations in this commune are satisfied that both funds function well under this arrangement.

Discussing the proposal made by the commune officers on the decentralisation of the fund management in FGDs, provincial officials agree with the rationales proposed. A pre-condition for this new arrangement is additional training for commune officials for management of this resource, and the strengthening of the 'check and inspect' aspects of its implementation to ensure appropriate fund utilisation.

Community

As the example in Box 9 demonstrates, the community appreciates the assistance offered by the targeted programme. However, its implementation suffers from low levels of participation and from transparency.

The beneficiaries the RPPA team met highly appreciate both the material and spiritual aspects of the targeted assistance. Other community members expressed the same appreciation. They acknowledge that the government assistance promotes and motivates support mobilised by mass organisations. All villagers that met with the research team said that the help is directed to the right people. However, in their opinion many other people who are in the same or similar conditions, and who have a great need for assistance, are excluded from this programme.

In all places, the villagers informed the RPPA team that the process of identification is complex. It is a multi-level process, starting from province and going to the village and back again, taking a long time before its completion.

Commune officers proposed to shorten this process by delegating authority to the commune government to control the budget and processes for the assistance programme.

Not only is it low in participation by the community, the process is also far from being transparent. The community is not informed about eligibility criteria or the benefits that are directed to needy people. In My Duc, people reported that only the village head decides who should be helped. In other districts, the villagers reported that leaders of village institutions meet and decide together.

The benefit transfer appears not to be very open or transparent. An officer of the CPC comes and transfers the cash to a beneficiary in person, without communicating this assistance to the community. This limited participation decreases the awareness of the community about the needs of the people who cannot help themselves, and constrains community mobilisation for this support.

Box 9: Operation of the Targeted Programme

Ms Xuan, 84, lives on her own in a house left to her by her parents in a village of My Duc district. She has no children. However from time to time a daughter of her sister comes and helps. Since 2001, she has been receiving a monthly allowance of VND55,000 offered by the government. She had not asked for it, and she did not complete any application. Her niece told her that it is the government gift for her to buy rice.

Since then, she gets the allowance regularly. At *Tet*, she also receives some gifts from the government. Ms Xuan is a member of the village old age association. The annual membership fee is VND4,000. At the age of 65, an old person can join this association. When he or she passes away, the family will get back the accumulated fee amount. The association will arrange the funeral and buy the person a funeral flag.

In addition to the government allowance, the old woman has some income from farming. Her niece plants rice for her on 11 *thuoc*¹¹ of land. In a small garden, she plants banana. She makes some VND7,000 a day from selling banana leaves. She thinks the allowance is very important in enabling her to have enough food to eat. The money allows her to minimise the farm work, which she is now too weak to do.

Source: SSI

5.5 Recommendations

In summary, there is a formal system ensuring social safety nets or some form of a social insurance scheme operating in villages. However, the citizens are not well aware of how this system works. The poor and other groups who suffer from

¹¹ One *thuoc* is 36 square metres

disasters, accidents or vulnerability are inactive recipients, having no clear information on their rights.

The RPPA agrees strongly with measures proposed by the community to improve the quality of social assistance. Firstly, the level of support for those who cannot help themselves should be increased to the level of the food poverty line, which for the time being is VND100,000. Secondly, the process of identification of the beneficiaries should be more transparent, allowing more community participation and aiming also at mobilising better community support to complement the government formal support.

Another recommendation emerges from the discussion with government officials on decentralisation of the power to control the social assistance programme. At the policy level, the government should consider and pilot authorisation of the CPCs to manage the social assistance programme and identify conditions for this innovative model.

Chapter 6: Public Administration Reform

This chapter explores the CPRGS targets of accelerating public administration reform, and providing the poor with knowledge of the law. The Public Administration Reform (PAR) programme intends to establish a more responsive, transparent, accountable and efficient public sector that is better organised, structured, resourced and staffed in order to deliver services to people and businesses.

6.1. PAR Implementation

The PAR's intention is to generate social benefits through reducing transaction costs and opportunities for rent seeking, while freeing people's time and resources to deal with production issues rather than with 'red tape'. This assumption has been better realised in Ha Tay than in Hai Duong.

The Picture Drawn by the Government

The RPPA learned that, in Hai Duong, the PAR is under experimentation in two districts, which are not selected for this assessment. In Ha Tay this reform is yet to be implemented. However, the assessment team observed that the environment is being prepared favourably for the reform as can be seen in Box 10.

In FGDs in Ha Tay province, government officials at various levels reported on drastic changes, which are implemented under the administrative reforms triggered by Decision 136/2001/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister in September 2001. Government departments were restructured and responsibilities clarified. A number of older staff were encouraged to retire. At the district level, the number of divisions was reduced from 14 to ten.

Box 10: The Streamlined Administrative Processes are more Efficient

"Today, administrative processes are very much simplified. The time for many processes has been reduced from a week to between two to three days. For example, to get a notarised certification or confirmation of a copy at our office it now takes only one day, although the law allows for three days. Birth certificates are issued in half an hour. According to Decree 75, our Justice Office today is authorised to sign for certification, which make this process faster. All the fee charges are made public; everyone can see it at the Citizen Reception Office".

Source: Dan Phuong Justice Office

In a CPC, the number of staff is fixed. The norm is 19 staff for a commune with a population under 10,000, or 21 staff for populations over 10,000. There is a staff-training programme, which sends the staff to formal and informal education establishments. To address personnel needs, the regulation is flexible to the extent that government departments or people's committees are allowed to recruit and hire additional staff, if their budget allows, as illustrated by the example of communes in the Nam Sach district. This opportunity opens options for the CPCs to recruit young and educated staff for their own needs using their allocated finances.

As an important part of the reform process, all visited CPCs informed the RPPA that all official documents are now typewritten. Hand-written official documents do not exist anymore. The CPCs reported that, at this level, clear processes were set up for performing and co-ordinating tasks between divisions.

Government officers explained that documented and pre-announced procedures and deadlines for reactions to citizens' requests promote professionalism. The people's committees and their departments at all levels confirmed this change. Similar changes have also been introduced to other government businesses, such as the Social Policy Banks or AgriBanks.

The most common administrative services are record changes in a household register, the issuing of birth certificates, resident (temporary) permits and leave permits, marriage registration, curriculum vitae certification, certification for household assets, issuing permits for housing construction, and residency/administration?? for business purposes such as loans and land ownership certification. These services are performed during office hours according to a pre-announced timetable.

The current measures demonstrate some emerging issues to be faced by local government. The first issue is that of multi-function. Because of staff cuts, some titles and positions have no salary back up, thus officials of mass organisations often take government positions. An example is the position of the Head of the Division for Religious Affairs in My Duc district. This position is occupied by the Vice-Chair of the Fatherland Front. Another example is the post of officer for the Division of the Committee for Advancement of Women, which is occupied by a leader of the District WU.

Another issue is unclear lines of authority or responsibility. An example is the case of My Duc, where the staff of CPCs and the DPC are confused about who is responsible for what in regard to land issues or solving conflict on land issues. The CPCs think they have only an arbitrary role with no decision-making power, while the district government thinks the commune government should take this responsibility. Similar disputes are observed in solving issues of justice, such as who can initiate and investigate justice cases.

A PAR measure is to formalise the status of the officers of the CPCs, a very welcome change. The staff see this as an opportunity for improved job security and professionalism, which would help improve their performance, and an opportunity to improve their education and skills. According to a numbers of SSIs with the district officers however, the challenge now is that the qualifications of commune government staff are far from the level of skills desired. Many positions will not be filled if the requirements are not followed. Not only is the education level inadequate, but also public administration knowledge and skills among the commune officers needs a lot of improvement.

The villagers, for example in My Duc district, see that the change in the status of the CPC might have two effects. A positive aspect is that government officers will improve their professionalism. They may become more responsible because they are paid adequately and they do not have to engage in site business. However, the other possible effect can be increasing bureaucratism and further removal from citizens' concerns. They believe that preventive measures are required.

Citizen's Report

While villagers in Ha Tay observed a number of positive changes, compared to conditions in 1999, villagers in Hai Duong reported complicated administrative procedures and related costs. All villagers consulted in Ha Tay felt that the administrative processes of the CPC are now much more efficient. All of them noticed that costs and required expenses are now publicised and therefore more transparent. Citizens' experiences with civil servants are that public administrative tasks, such as certification or notary services, are performed faster and require much less paper work. The citizens appreciate the benefits in the form of time and cost savings.

The poor argue that they are not the ones who benefit most. Those who need these services more and often are the better-off, thus these are the primary beneficiaries. The poor benefit in a lesser degree as they do have fewer needs for these services. In FGDs, the poor do not report about the benefits of the PAR to any extent. Moreover, some complained that officials treated them without proper respect or politeness.

In the villages of Hai Duong, while some appreciate the progress made in administrative services, the other larger group of citizens are not satisfied with the services they receive from the CPC. According to this group, the process of registration is lengthy, and waiting periods are required because the concerned officers are often absent. The villagers are not aware that the fee charges are announced publicly. They pay as much as the commune officers tell them to pay. In a FGD, some villagers reported that the fee was collected from them. Others said that, as they are friends of the officers, they do not have to pay

fees. A migrant woman complained that she paid VND4,000 more than others did for the same temporary residence permit¹².

Box 11: Confusion about the Process of Processing Citizens' Complaints

Mr Nam, 61, lives in a village of Lien Ha commune. He used to receive his monthly assistance, as he is a war invalid at the level of 10% injury. His assistance stopped coming for an unknown reason two years ago. At that time he did not care as the amount was insignificant and his economic situation was all right.

These days, as he cannot work because of his poor health and because his economic situation has worsened, he decided to reclaim his benefits. He went to the CPC several times, to the District Office for Invalid and Social Affairs, to the DOLISA, and he even went to the MOLISA. Mr Nam does not know where his case will be finally solved, although everywhere he has gone he has been met and welcomed. He was advised that his case could be solved at a cost of VND6 million.

Source: SSI

There is evidence of the empowerment of citizens, especially those who have had experience working with the government or army (see Box 11). These citizens can make complaints and approach government offices, as they are confident in their rights. On the contrary, the poor and women feel helpless. Both groups said that they do not have a clear idea of where to get legal or administrative advice. When a citizen is not satisfied or confused with the service, his or her first natural reaction is to use money to improve the process, although this might not gain the desired result. Cases where complaints are about an event far in the past appear to be the most challenging to government offices, because the district and commune governments do not have an appropriate filing and/or archive system.

One-Stop Shop

The one-stop shop as a form of administrative service is yet to be implemented in Ha Tay. In Nam Sach, the visited district of Hai Duong, this reform measure has not taken place yet. In the conversation with civil servants on this topic, they expressed an uncertainty as to the effectiveness of this measure. They believed that the introduction of this service requires additional costs, investments in office infrastructure and improvements to human resources, such as training.

¹² The specified amount other people pay is VND6,000.

6.2. Law on Company and Private Enterprises

With the introduction of company law, the number of new formal enterprises has risen fast. Ha Tay Province recorded a phenomenal number of 600 new registered enterprises within the period 1999 to 2003. In Lien Ha commune, Dan Phuong district, there are four limited companies, two private enterprises and three co-operatives that are registered and functional. Together with the establishment of enterprises come non-farm salary-based jobs. A similar observation is made in Hai Duong. The Farmer Association of Nam Sach District, for example, recorded ten new private enterprises created in the last year in onion processing, *cong nong* truck building and the production of floor tiles.

The local government in visited communes, especially in Ha Tay, reported that enterprises are increasing in number, creating more local jobs. The SSIs with the entrepreneurs revealed that they are satisfied with the costs of registration and the time required for processing. All of them stated that the current processes are simpler and the paperwork needed for registration is minimal. None of them reported hidden or under-the-table costs.

Among the visited communes, Lien Ha is the most dynamic for small and micro-rural businesses. Here almost all village entrepreneurs confirmed that, these days, all administrative processes related to business are faster. A businessperson from a micro-enterprise explained that: "Before 1999, everything took lots of time. To get a temporary residence permit required passing three offices. Now, things go very fast. Perhaps, if you pay, you are better serviced". Non-farm households in Tho An commune, for instance, are satisfied with administrative services. They observed that government offices now work according to pre-announced hours, which is a big progress. A farmer in Tho An village explained to the RPPA that it took him only seven days to obtain a loan from the bank, and the fee was VND7,000, which had been announced publicly.

For a rural business, registration is efficient. An owner of a company in the same commune informed the RPPA that registration took him only three days, much faster than the required time by law of 15 days. He paid VND600,000 for the registration fee and VND200,000 to open his tax account.

Business people in visited communes expressed their concern in regard to difficulties or challenges in finding markets, the lack of market information and the lack of up-to-date knowledge about government regulations on enterprises. To them a major constraint to their business development is a serious shortage of skilled labour. They need to develop internship schemes in which to train their labour. Some complained about unregulated fees and 'unlawful' fees when they transport their goods to the market.

In a craft village of Lien Ha Commune, rural industry has increased fast. At present 80% of the households are reported to be engaged in carpentry. This has increased from 20% four years ago to the current rate of 60% of all household's income. As the industry grows, the business is constrained by access to land. The village is crowded with carpentry workshops, which fill the village with noise and dust, creating such a polluted environment that the local teachers and pupils complain that it interferes with their study. The land-use planning scheme offered by the CPC was not agreed to by local businesses, thus land is waiting for its users (see Box 12).

Box 12: A Household Carpentry Enterprise

Mr Hoa, 59, is an entrepreneur of Dan Phuong district. He has learnt carpentry from his farther-in law (who had learnt this skill from his brother). Mr Hoa started his business in 1973. Now his private enterprise employs nine labourers. These young men were recruited from neighbouring communes in the district, and they were retained after a six-month internship. In his enterprise, all key positions, such as marketing, quality control, and accounting, are occupied by his sons and daughter-in-laws.

Since 1998, the carpentry workshop expanded its liquid assets from VND25 million to VND35 million. During this period, the number of partners who function as reliable sales outlets, all in Hanoi, has increased from four to eight.

He is proud of the fact that in the past five years none of his workers have left him. He trusts that his fair and timely payment system, regular and good income at a daily wage of VND30,000, and share ownership offered by his workshop are the success factors. He loaned out seven employees VND 0.75 million, which was paid off in instalments subtracted from the monthly wage, to buy one planer per person as their own equity.

Mr Hoa would like to expand his business and employ more labourers, but is facing a couple of barriers. First and foremost, he cannot expand without additional workspace. Although the CPC has planned a craft zone in the fringe of the village, the 10-year lease term is too short a time for him to move his workshop there and invest more. Second, the cost of the lease of VND19.6 million for a Sao of land, offered by the CPC for the period, is quite challenging for his family business. Mr Hoa thought that if the land lease issue is resolved, his workshop could engage in big contracts valued at more than VND200,000 million and employ more than 30 workers.

Source: SSI

6.3 Recommendations

Joining the voices of the villagers and government officers in the visited site, the RPPA team would like to propose further administrative reforms at all levels. Attention in the implementation process should focus on capacity building for government officers, especially at the lower level and specifically in the commune. Legal advice is an area which appears the least developed in the visited areas, and is another area of attention for further development in PAR. Lastly, a check and inspect mechanism should be in place to ensure the high performance of the PAR in all locations. In areas where handicraft or rural industry has the potential to be developed, the needs of local entrepreneurs in accessing land and skilled labour are emerging issues for job creation policies to address, in addition to business registration and financial support.

Chapter 7: Migration and Environment

*"Can we making a living out of 14 thuoc of land per person?"
A poor woman. Phuc Lam commune*

One of the purposes of this chapter is to explore the issue of outward migration, an important emerging issue in the two provinces, as well as to assess the impact of this factor on the poverty situation and poverty reduction policies. Another purpose is to review the importance of strengthening local involvement in the management of the environment and natural resources in the Red River Delta regions, using examples from the two provinces. Both issues are important to poor people, who may suffer from depletion of the natural resources they depend on for their subsistence. They may not be able to take adequate action when pollution or other forms of environmental degradation affect their land. Urban issues are not yet important in the researched areas in both provinces, and they therefore will not be covered in this chapter.

7.1. Migration

*"If there were no jobs in Hanoi, we would not have known how to survive."
A poor farmer, Tho An Commune*

In both visited provinces the main flow of migration is in the outgoing direction. Incoming migration is of a small scale and only occurs in district towns. Options for job migration are associated with different social groups (see Table 8). Migration might be caused by export labour, long-term distant employment in the industrial sector, or short-term and short-distance labour requirements. Migration is less intensive in Ha Tay Province than it is in Hai Duong.

Labour Export

In Hai Duong, labour export is important to the process of alleviating poverty, while in Ha Tay this activity is not so frequent. Hai Duong province reported that it has so far exported 6,000 labourers, about half of which were sent to Malaysia. The income offered by a job overseas is quite attractive. A woman reported that her daughter sends home a monthly USD200.

Export of labour largely involves women. Talks with men and women in Nam Sach district revealed that most export labourers are female. In one batch, there could be some dozens of women leaving a village. Women are being hired in both industry and service sectors. The most popular job is that of house helpers. Women leave house and field work to their husbands in exchange for a high income overseas.

Labour export is well organised by labour export companies. An applicant is required to deposit some VND20 million to VND80 million, and to take part in job

orientation and language training. The villagers reported that they can get loans from local banks to cover a fraction of these costs.

The poor face two major constraints in accessing this opportunity, limiting their participation in this scheme. Among export labourers, a group of villagers of Nam Sach estimated that only 10% are from poor groups. First, the deposit is too high. Second, the education level required for an overseas job (12 years) is often higher than what the poor have achieved (nine years or less).

Table 8: Migration Among Wealth Groups and Job Opportunities

Wealth group /migrants	Destination	Type of income generation
Better-off Young adult	Overseas, for example, Malaysia, Taiwan, Germany, Russia, South Korea Urban enterprises	Export labour: male to industrial enterprises, farming; females as house helpers Permanent, stable jobs or salary or contract based jobs
Middle Young adult	Hai Duong Mountainous areas Big cities in the South or Hanoi Overseas but few, for example, Malaysia	Few: private enterprises Temporary Seasonal jobs requiring distant travel Trade Selling labour for hard work, masonry, carpentry
Poor Main labourers	Local or urban centres (near)	Seasonal jobs between crops Petty trade

Source: Wealth ranking and FGDs in all sites

Inter-Country Long-Distance Labour Migration

The direction of outward migration, and the related type of income generation, is connected to wealth groups. The better-off have a better chance to be hired in a salary-based job in a company, while in contrast, the opportunities for the poor lie in local, temporary or seasonal low-paid jobs, or work in urban centres. Gender division is also distinct: women seek jobs as house helpers or petty traders, while men work mainly on construction sites.

Migration brings with it both positive and negative impacts on the life of migrants, their families and community. Migrants who are now back in their villages reported that the most positive aspect of the migration are the increased income and savings, although the amount varies from group to group. Some migrants send home some VND 200,000 per month. Some do not send at all. The size of the remittance varies very much among families. The first benefit the migration brings to their families is the remittance, followed by a broader view on life. The migrants appreciate the opportunity of exposure to new experiences, both positive and negative. Their social network is increased, improving their social assets.

FGDs with various strata of villagers revealed that the negative aspects of the migration are many. As the majority of migrants are male, and part of a young educated labour force, the migration leaves no room for improvement in the quality of the labour force amongst their families and communities left at home. Women told the assessment team that when their husbands migrate, the women are left with all the burdens of housework and fieldwork. There are cases of broken families, and villagers have noticed that the frequency of divorce is increasing. Women are scared about the threat of spreading HIV/AIDs to the community, when their husbands are away for so long in provinces where HIV/AIDs is high, such as Quang Ninh or Ho Chi Minh City. Migrants reported on a decrease in their good health, and some migrants became drug users and/or HIV positive. Migrants also face problems with irregularities in the system. They might engage in a contract with an illegal labour export company and, as a result, lose their huge investment. Villagers also reported on the collapse of the hiring companies, leading to lost time, labour and investment.

Box 13: Migration for Jobs

Ms Hong, 48, is a resident of a village in Dan Phuong district. Her husband is a carpenter with a daily income of some VND20,000. The family has five adult children, three of whom are men. Her older daughter has married away. Two others, after finishing high school, help her with the house and farm work.

Her two sons have migrated to Ho Chi Minh City. The older son dropped out of school after grade nine. Six years ago, the family tried their best to help him to finish a car-driving course. After that, he went to Ho Chi Minh City to work as a taxi driver. The other son was also sent to the driving school. This year, his older brother helped him find a job in Ho Chi Minh City. Both men maintain resident registration in their home village. For temporary permits in Ho Chi Minh City, Ms Hong gets the leave certificates for her sons and regularly sends them to the drivers. To her, this is not difficult at all. The parents are happy that the sons help one another, although they were not able to assist the parents with cash. The older brother supported the younger one with food and living until the latter found a job. The older brother is married; his wife is a tailor. His wife and he plan to come back when he turns 40.

Ms Hong is happy that her sons have a good living. The older son rents a house at VND500,000 a month, and his family has access to electricity, running water and a television. Ms Hong said: "Our sons are doing quite well there. If they stayed in the village, we would not have been able to make ends met".

Source: SSI

Migrants pointed to several constraining factors to migration. The first is limited job opportunities in urban areas. Although there are better-paid jobs, finding a job for an immigrant is very challenging. Low levels of education are another constraining factor. Migrants with low education have very limited opportunities to find good and stable jobs. There is almost no hope in finding a salary-based job if the education level is lower than secondary. Migrants told the assessment team

that some companies require applicants to have local permanent resident status, motorbikes or housing, which exclude immigrants from these jobs. Lastly, job placement services are ineffective, not reaching this group of the population. Normally announcements stop at the CPC office and stay there, leaving the population with no information.

Arriving at the destination, the new residents reported to the RPPA team that they make efforts to adapt. Local regulations, donations and fees are always honoured. Women and men reported that they are treated fairly by local governments there. Local paid services, such as health, water or electricity, are accessible to them as long as they can pay. The people the assessment team met did not have children of school age, so no information was available on their education.

Finance services are not available for migrants. The existing bank regulations provide no access to credit services for migrants, who stay without permanent resident status. The migrants may come back to their locality of origin to obtain a loan, but this is not practiced. Another low note is the six-month validity of the leave permits, which is too short a period. Of course, migrants do not travel a long way to renew this permit. They ask family members to renew the permit or obtain a new one, and send to them by post. When their permit is not renewed in time they can be fined from between VND50,000 to VND100,000, as a poor woman of Phu Yen Commune reported. For migrant couples, who are non-permanent residents, the birth certificates of their newborns have to be registered in the original residence of the parents, which is inconvenient.

Although the visited provinces do not have many immigrants, the opinion and behaviour of the officials who are planning for and delivering services to inward or outward migrants might shed light on how these issues will be managed in the future.

FGDs with government officers at district and province levels reveal that in all sites, links between migrants and local government are weak. The commune government maintains an ineffective and unreliable registration system. As a result, the government is not in a position to plan or deliver effective services to this group.

Health and education services are accessible to migrants, but they may have to pay some extras for education compared with the locals. Government officers agree that the current bank regulations do not include migrants in their list of possible clients, based on their resident status. In the visited areas, targeting services are not delivered to migrants, who come in small numbers in connection with marriage or job transfers.

So far, an implication of migration to urban areas is a mechanical increase of the population. an expected implication of which includes an increase in demand for public services, such as increased workloads for resident registration, traffic

congestion, demand for housing and the creation of jobs for immigrants. Some areas that are predicted to worsen are public order issues, conflicts, pressure on existing education and health services, and the degradation of the environment.

Short-Distance and Temporary Migration

Recently, seasonal or temporary labour migration to nearby urban centres has become an increasing trend, particularly in Hai Duong. For example, in Tho An commune it is estimated that 80% of the labour force goes daily to Hanoi for short-term and small-scale jobs, working 12 to 18 hours a day.

Daily labour sale is a new important livelihood strategy, especially for women. In an interview, a women's group in Lien Ha commune, Dan Phuong district, agreed that: "Labour sale is increasing and this trend cannot be reversed. It becomes our main source of livelihood as agriculture is too small a source of income". Many households reportedly leased out their land in order to be able to engage in labour sale or petty trade in Hanoi or other urban centres. In this commune, women travel everyday to Hanoi and work as house cleaners or petty traders.

Daily work in the city also is connected with a new vulnerability. Women in the two visited communes in Ha Tay do not stay overnight in the town. This practice means that they can avoid sexual harassment where they work. Women in Lien Ha commune reported that sometimes on the way back home they were stopped by drug addicts, who tried to attack and rob their daily earnings. A woman in Tho An commune told the research team that there were cases where women were raped when they worked in cities.

When this livelihood strategy is constrained by the policy of 'cleaning the streets', women had to quit this income generation opportunity, shifting to other livelihood strategies, which the women felt were more challenging and unsafe. For example, in Tho An commune, women reported that a few years ago they were able to trade fruits easily in Hanoi's streets. They told the research team that: "Now the traders with *xe tho* (bicycles with attached large baskets) are frequently arrested. They [the police officers] are too strict, thus we are quitting these kinds of jobs. A few of us decided to trade in Green Markets, which operate at nights".

Recommendations

Echoing the proposal of the poor, both men and women, the research team would like to suggest the government consider the following:

1. To increase the ceiling for loan schemes, which supports a poor family to access labour export opportunities. The current inefficient loan amount pushes the poor into indebtedness and increases their vulnerability to high-interest loans by private moneylenders.

2. To support in-country job opportunities, so that when labourers return from overseas work they have a chance to find new jobs. This would strengthen the position of the poor who escape poverty by working overseas.
3. To create an enabling environment for job placement services to boost inter-province labour flow from villages to urban centre. This action would facilitate access by the poor, especially women, to income opportunities offered by the process of urbanisation, and increase their safety working far away from home.

7.2. Environment

"We used to wash ourselves in our ponds or river. The water was clean. Nowadays, nobody dares to use water from rivers or ponds." A poor woman of Phuc Lam Commune

Some emerging environment issues in the visited communities are solid and liquid waste management, pesticide waste control, and issues relevant to business development in a handicraft village. The issue of forestry is not discussed as the research team did not encounter this issue.

Perception

In the visited areas, people and institutions define their 'environment' in very close connection with their living and working conditions. In Hai Duong, both sub-urban and rural dwellers see water and sanitation issues (liquid and solid waste) as environment themes. Rural dwellers add pesticide use as an environmental concern. People also include the social environment as a concept. The latter comprises social evils, such as drug abuse, prostitution, and the related issue of HIV/AIDS. As an example, the My Duc villagers consider dirty village roads when it rains, the cleanness of village public places such as village entry gates, contracted sluice, and uncontrolled human and animal waste as environmental issues.

Concerns and Issues

An overall observation from all three districts is the trend that the environment is becoming increasingly damaged. Waste management systems are in need in rural areas. Environment issues are specific to certain communities but not to all sites, so any generalisation is inappropriate.

Water Pollution

Seemingly, water pollution is an increasing issue in villages. All people consulted in My Duc agreed that the surface water is seriously polluted. It is unknown whether underground water is polluted to the same level. The pollutants are human and animal waste, pesticide waste and residues, and industrial waste. A coping strategy would be a shift away from using open wells and water from ponds, lakes or rivers (for cooking, washing, bathing and swimming) to using

bore-wells with or without filtering systems. The poor have no access to these facilities. The dwellers believed that the Day River is polluted with waste from surrounding factories and villages.

In Nam Sach, Hai Duong province, the villagers also reported that they limited the use of water from wells and rivers, relying more on rainwater, because of the pollution caused by unprocessed liquid waste. The villagers also felt unsafe using these water sources because of pesticide waste.

Land Quality Degrading

Villagers felt that the quality of land (fertility) is decreasing because of intensive and long-time use of chemicals. Organic matter in the form of composts has been used less and less.

IPM

IPM techniques are widespread in the two provinces as farmers have been trained in IPM, and have put these techniques into practice, for many years. Knowledge about and skills in pest management have assisted farmers to make rational use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers, thus helping maintain a better environment.

Uncontrolled Waste Management: Waste management needs emerging in villages

Villagers in three visited districts observed that their public space – pastures, roads, gates and rivers – are used to dispose of wastes of all types, polluting the water and air. They would like to see villages or commune authorities solve these problems.

Waste management is a concept that is yet to emerge in villages. An intensifying rural environment problem is the pressure from increased animal production industries operating from households on the waste canals of villages. In all visited villages of My Duc for example, the number of pig heads per household is rapidly increasing, while the sluice or drainage system has remained unchanged for many years. The system is incapable of processing human waste, let alone the increase in animal waste.

In townships, community-based waste management schemes are emerging. The villagers in My Duc and Dan Phuong explained the scheme of waste collection organised by the community. Households cover the costs of maintenance of this scheme. In the villages of Nam Sach, this scheme is also observed. The villagers reported on a worsening trend in solid waste management. To cope, villagers from Thuong Duong village in Nam Sach decided to form a waste collecting group, which costs each household VND3,000 per month to maintain.

In a village of Lien Ha commune, where the handicraft industry has rapidly developed recently, the villagers were unhappy about the noise and dust created by the wood-processing industry (see Box 14). Not only has it had negative

impacts on people's health, the air and noise pollution has a negative impact on the quality of education as it strongly impacts on the classes in the village. At present, problem solving on this issue is blocked as the CPC's land-use planning scheme has not been agreed to by local businesses.

Box 14: An Environment Issue Associated with Business Development

A school teacher in Lien Ha Commune told the research team that in her commune there is a concern about pollution caused by business development. Carpentry recently became a major source of household income, constituting 60%. However, the air in the villages is full of wooden dust coming from the planers and sawing machines. Lung and eye diseases are very common among villagers. Many young people were rejected as new army recruits because of these diseases. The sawing machines and the planers make such a noise that the pupils cannot hear their teachers.

Source: SSI

Recommendations

When the RPPA discussed how their environment concerns can be addressed, villagers, mainly in the two districts of Ha Tay, suggested the following proposals. Firstly, the government should include environment issues in socio-economic planning, specifically the issues of waste (both solid and liquid) management. The community-based management system should be promoted and encouraged. The government may support waste collecting and processing units, which are now financed by the community. The government should ensure that the management of plastic pesticide containers/cover bags is appropriate and in place. The community in agreement with the government should establish the incentive and disincentives schemes for violation of environment protection rules. The government should assist the community in improving village infrastructure, such as road and waste canals. The government should encourage household or village-based waste processing technology, which could help to produce compost for crops. Lastly, the policy should assist households to install biogas schemes to address the harmful effects of animal production waste.

To the RPPA team, there are several challenges for implementing these recommendations. The first challenge is the awareness of the long terms benefits of improving the environment, which is low in visited areas. Secondly, the capacity for fund raising and budget allocation for these public goods is very limited. All funded programmes that the team became aware of during the assessment are related to economic development. The last challenge is the limited planning capacity for environmental protection among planners.

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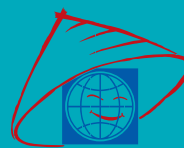
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