

Refining policy with the poor - participatory research in Vietnam

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Abstract

In March 2001 the Government of Vietnam produced an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP) and announced its intention to develop a Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) by the end of April 2002. In the IPRSP, the Government outlined its commitment to involve a broad range of stakeholders – including poor communities, local government authorities and the enterprise sector – in drafting the CPRGS. The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), who was assigned by the Government of Vietnam to lead the CPRGS drafting process, asked the World Bank and a group of international NGOs to support them in carrying out the local consultations. The consultations took place in six rural and urban locations across Vietnam selected to represent a range of poverty situations. About 1800 people participated in the research. This paper presents the findings from this research exercise in Vietnam in which poor households and communities were consulted on the content of the I-PRSP. It outlines the methodology used in the consultations and describes the processes followed to ensure that the findings were influential in developing the government of Vietnam's *Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy* (CPRGS, known as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in most other countries).

Résumé

En Mars 2001, le Gouvernement du Vietnam diffuse le Document de Stratégie de Réduction de la Pauvreté Intérimaire (DSRP-I) et annonce son intention de finaliser le CPRGS (*Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy* ou Stratégie globale de réduction de la pauvreté et de croissance) avant la fin du mois d'Avril 2002. Dans le DSRP-I, le Gouvernement souligne son engagement à faire participer différents acteurs – incluant les communautés pauvres, les autorités locales, et les entrepreneurs – à l'élaboration du CPRGS. Le Ministère du Plan et de l'investissement (MPI), chargé par le gouvernement pour diriger le processus d'élaboration du document, a demandé à la Banque mondiale et à un groupe d'ONG de les appuyer pour la conduite des consultations locales. Les consultations ont eu lieu dans six zones rurales et urbaines au Vietnam sélectionnées pour représenter différentes situations de pauvreté. Environ 1800 personnes ont participé à cette opération. Cet article présente les résultats de cette opération expérimentale au Vietnam au cours de laquelle des ménages et des communautés pauvres ont été interrogés sur le contenu du DSRP-I. L'article décrit la méthodologie utilisée et le processus suivi pour assurer que les résultats aient un impact sur l'élaboration du CPRGS du Vietnam.

Introduction

It is estimated that in the mid-1980's seven out of every ten Vietnamese were living in poverty. A little more than a decade later – a decade of reforms and rapid economic growth – the incidence of poverty has halved. Latest household survey data (2002) suggests that 29% of the population is now under the poverty line and 11% of the population is so poor that consumption is inadequate to meet nutritional needs. Social and other indicators have also improved significantly. But many of the newly non-poor households are still nearly poor, hovering close to the poverty line. Their vulnerability to shocks and crises coupled with the recent slowdown in economic growth means that the gains in poverty reduction cannot yet be considered robust.

This article presents the findings from a research exercise in Vietnam in which poor households and communities were consulted on the content of an *Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (I-PRSP). It outlines the methodology used in the consultations and describes the processes followed to ensure that the findings were influential in developing the Government of Vietnam's *Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy* (CPRGS), which grew out of the IPRSP. By documenting the experience in Vietnam, we hope to throw light on some questions that development practitioners elsewhere are asking. These include: How can an I-PRSP, written in the (at times unclear) language of Government, be converted into a communication tool for dialogue with poor households, men and women, and local communities about policy options and areas for Government action? What techniques might help at the community level to encourage this discussion about policy options? How can the very detailed findings from the community level be used so they contribute in a meaningful way to the development of strategies and the choice of policy measures and public investments? What parts of the process have made a difference in terms of the level of influence the findings have had?

A fuller discussion of the process and findings is available in other documents (Shanks and Turk, 2002)

Implementation Process

The process is broken down into three distinct phases – preparation and grounding stage, fieldwork facilitation stage, analysis and validation stage – which roots the PPA research with local partners, increases ownership and improves the acceptability of findings at all levels.

Preparation stage. The first stage in preparing for the consultations involved reviewing the I-PRSP and to extrapolate from it a set of questions that could be put into a workable research framework to guide the fieldwork. This demanded a considerable amount of time and discussion between the facilitation teams who met at regular intervals over a period of three months before the fieldwork began. Developing the research framework involved three key steps: 1) defining the scope and content of the consultation; 2) identifying the main policy actions proposed by Government for each component; and 3) developing a set of research questions related to each component. There were profound challenges associated with extrapolating questions that could be meaningful in the field from vaguely-phrased government policy documents.

Fieldwork facilitation stage. All teams made use of a variety of techniques including: focus group discussions; semi-structured interviews; wealth/wellbeing rankings, matrix and preference ranking and scoring; Flow diagrams; institutional ranking and venn diagrams.

In guiding the focus groups, experienced and strong facilitation was required in order to ensure the discussions result in a clear set of policy related outputs and recommendations instead of lapsing into a description of the dimensions of poverty. For this the facilitators need to adopt both a general line and a specific line of questioning. On the general level, it is necessary to follow a clear sequence in order to ensure the discussion remains on track in the limited time available, as follows:

- Are the proposed policy actions relevant to needs and conditions of the group?
- Do people agree with them? (If yes, why? If not, why not?)
- Are the policy actions realistic and achievable or not?
- If the policy actions are to be implemented in the area how can they be achieved?
- From the proposed policy actions, which are most important? (Priority ranking)
- From the proposed policy actions, what is missing?
- Do the participants have other priorities?
- Would they recommend adding anything to the policies?

Though the choice of actual techniques was left up to individual research teams, the research framework that was prepared collectively by the six research teams ensured consistency in the detailed areas of enquiry so that findings could eventually be aggregated to a national level .

Analysis. The local consultations yielded large data sets of numerous viewpoints and ideas, priorities and recommendations put forward by the local participants. The main steps involved in processing this information included: (i) compiling and aggregating the data from the focus group meetings and participant groups in each location; (ii) comparing the results within and between these participant groups in order to identify firstly, the main areas of commonality, consensus and discrepancy and after, the most important policy messages and recommendations; and (iii) preparation of draft summary reports from the individual study locations. Consulting on the individual policy components (health, education, employment, agriculture and so on) does not fully expose the way in which different sets of policy actions need to come together to create an effective poverty reduction strategy. In this respect the individual / household interviews provided an invaluable source of additional information and understanding. The interviews can be used to reveal the interdependency of factors and forces that contribute to individual / household poverty situations – and so the way in which policy actions to need to be integrated and harmonized. The key to interpreting such interview material from the policy perspective lies in identifying critical policy linkages that are likely to yield the greatest benefits to poor people.

Validating the results. However carefully the research framework, questions and exercises are developed, the fieldwork and, particularly, the analysis of findings are processes fraught with biases. The reality of trying to organize community responses and use them to make a meaningful contribution to policy formulation – as distinct from using them descriptively in a poverty assessment - often requires some extrapolation and interpretation of original findings. Unlike earlier PPAs, where findings were intended to be descriptive of the causes and dimensions of poverty, collaborative researcher-participant policy analysis requires more probing and results are strongly guided by the direction of this probing. In these circumstances, it is extremely important to verify the findings and the main conclusions with participants and other stakeholders to ensure that the analysis has not somehow drifted away from what people were trying to say. So, feedback sessions are important in all forms of participatory research so that conclusions can be

checked with those who have contributed to the research. These sessions are especially valuable when the post-fieldwork analysis requires condensing the very detailed findings into suggested policy responses. In all the sites, feedback sessions were held at the community level to verify the findings. In addition, workshops were held for local Government officials (at district and provincial levels) to ensure that the findings were rooted in local policy-making processes.

In addition to improving the quality of the analysis, these feedback consultation workshops were important for generating stronger government buy-in to the findings. Many of the areas of discussion during the fieldwork are considered quite sensitive topics for public debate. In order to have official endorsement of the findings it was critical that local officials felt that their viewpoints were also represented in the findings and that policy recommendations were being based on a balanced understanding of the local circumstances.

Reflections on the design.

Those involved with the research felt that there were a number of important outputs, which included:

- Seeing change in the content of the CPRGS;
- Opening up debates on policy-making to new stakeholders;
- Demonstrating that participatory research could be a useful tool as plans and policies are formulated, going beyond providing background information on the causes and dimensions of poverty;
- Raising their own profile with national policy-making agencies;
- Developing new skills in policy analysis within their organizations;
- Cementing their relationships at a local level and enabling a change of direction towards more policy-based work at the provincial level;
- Capacity building of local government counterparts who had been trained to participate in the research; and
- Providing an opportunity for the partner organizations to give in-depth thought to a Government strategy – “if we had not been directly engaged in managing the consultation we would not have read and internalized [the CPRGS] so thoroughly”¹.

However, the process was by no means perfect. Reflections on the research process indicated the following areas of weakness:

1. Building a link between poor communities and policymaking processes requires that researchers involved in these types of exercises have strong policy analysis skills. Though good skills exist in facilitating participatory field research for assessment purposes, skills in linking *assessments of poverty* to *desirable policy action* are still quite rare in Vietnam. This constituted the single most important challenge in the work;
2. The research was resource-intensive, requiring more than 80 researchers to cover only a restricted number of locations to develop only a partial analysis of the CPRGS (since many topics had to be left out in order to make the research manageable);
3. Equity concerns were less well-captured in some sites than was hoped at the output. Inequities driven by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status were quite well-captured. But there was less full analysis of inequities associated with age and physical ability than was originally envisaged.;
4. Because the research framework was designed to provide a mechanism to provide feedback on what was included in the draft CPRGS, there was a gap in terms of generating discussion on potential areas of interest that were not documented in the draft CPRGS. For example, there was very little in the draft CPRGS that referred to issues of the environment.

Findings and Policy Responses

The findings from the six sites were synthesized into a set of suggested priority policy measures and public actions. In some instances these proposals constituted refinements to what was already suggested in the draft CPRGS – adding specificity to a general policy statement so that it could avoid potential pitfalls and so its benefits to the poor could be maximized. In other instances, suggestions were made to include new or different actions which could be more strongly supportive of a sustainable exit from poverty. These suggestions were grouped into four categories and eight sub-categories:

- I Creating Opportunities and supporting livelihoods for poor households
 - Improving basic infrastructure (seven suggestions)
 - Intensifying and diversifying agricultural production (seven suggestions)
 - Improving participation of poor households in markets (two suggestions)
 - Developing SMEs and household enterprises (five suggestions)

¹ Personal communication with Pham Van Ngoc, on behalf of Actionaid management team.

- Improving access to credit (six suggestions)
- Training and information (four suggestions)
- II Delivering quality basic services to poor households
 - Education (six suggestions)
 - Healthcare services for the poor (nine suggestions)
- III Reducing vulnerabilities and addressing risk for poor households (nine suggestions)
- IV Institutional arrangements for delivering the CPRGS effectively (ten suggestions)

The 65 suggestions are not detailed here, but are available in the full report.

The key messages from the report were used in a variety of ways to try to maximize the influence they would have as the CPRGS was re-drafted. Presentations on the findings from the consultations were made at regional meetings, where officials from national and sub-national levels of Government discussed early drafts of the CPRGS. Findings were also discussed with relevant line ministries and to a varying extent were used in the line ministries' inputs into the discussions on the CPRGS. Findings also informed donor responses to the drafts of the CPRGS which were circulated for comments. These responses were communicated to the Government in formal correspondence, through the interactions of various donor-Government partnership groups and in large consultation workshops which were held periodically.

A remaining challenge: institutionalizing participatory methods

These consultations on the draft CPRGS were not isolated research activities. Earlier, in 1999, four participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) had been conducted to provide high quality information for poverty analysis. This was used in conjunction with household survey data to produce a poverty assessment for government and donor use. The consultations on the draft CPRGS made a deliberate attempt to build on this work by returning to three of the PPA sites to conduct these consultations. A further research exercise in 2002 has involved PPAs in 12 sites across Veienam, bringing the views of a further 3600 people into the poverty analysis process.

Few are now disputing the value that the PPAs or the consultation exercises have brought to the poverty diagnosis work or to the planning activities, which build on the diagnosis. The question that now arises is the longer term role for participatory information in future planning and policy work. The PPAs and the consultation exercises were highly valuable, but also expensive. Some Government agencies have expressed a desire to integrate participatory methods into their work. This highlights an important issue about the limits of what can be achieved through a consultation exercise such as this when only a fraction of the population is engaged. Done competently, it can provide important feedback that will allow policy level debates to be better informed, hopefully at a time when various alternatives are still being discussed. Clearly, though, it should not become a distraction from or a substitute for a more important agenda of ensuring greater participation of the general population in decisions about policy measures, public actions and resource allocation. In the case of these consultations in Vietnam, a specific line of questioning was included to investigate the kind of actions that would be necessary to include in the CPRGS that would indeed foster more broad-based participation and downwards accountability in mainstream planning and budgeting activities. Greater openness and transparency by Government, improved information flows, a more vibrant and vocal civil society will all be necessary to create an environment where more mainstreamed participatory methods will work.

References:

Shanks, E. and C. Turk, 2002. *Refining Policy with the Poor: Approach, methodology and Influence*. World Bank, Hanoi, 2002.

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