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STRATEGIC ISSUES FOR A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN

A key objective of this study has been to prepare an action plan for addressing the poverty concerns of ethnic minorities in Viet Nam. Elements of such an action plan were prepared for the national workshop held in Hanoi on 18–19 September 2001. During this workshop, many proposals were put forward for activities that could be undertaken either by the Government of Viet Nam or by the international community and, specifically, ADB. More than 40 different proposals were put forward, some of these overlapping in substance.

In the course of the present study and its national workshop, it became clear that an action plan has to embrace a very diverse range of concerns. First, despite the substantial ethnological assessments that have been carried out in recent decades, there is need for further work to determine which population groups should be covered by the term “ethnic minorities.” Second, there is a need for a more coherent policy framework for ethnic minority development and for mechanisms to ensure that such a policy is translated into effective action at the provincial and commune levels. Third, there is a need for improved consultative mechanisms, to ensure that development and poverty reduction programs respond to the real needs of ethnic minority communities. Fourth, there is a need for policies and programs in different sectors (health and education, land and forestry, infrastructure development, and social services, among others). Fifth, it is important that the poverty reduction programs and projects of an organization like ADB have a coherent vision and objectives, involving ethnic minority representatives and responding to their felt needs. In this light, participants at the national workshop directed a number of their recommendations specifically to ADB.

This final chapter aims to summarize the principal recommendations for such an action plan, placing them in their appropriate context.

CLASSIFICATION OF ETHNIC GROUPS

The List of Ethnic Groups in Viet Nam, issued in 1978, has in many ways proved a useful and important tool for work on ethnic minorities. As seen in earlier chapters, it has permitted some analysis of poverty trends for different ethnic minority groups and has prepared the ground for some targeting of development and poverty reduction programs.

However, recent studies and experience have shown that the 1978 list is insufficient. A more precise identification of ethnic composition should now be accorded high priority. Attention should also be given to self-identification, in particular by the numerically small groups whose distinct identity is not recognized in the existing classification. A revised List of Ethnic Groups should be prepared and officially recognized as soon as possible. In the meantime, the relevant agencies should agree on a new interim list, based on existing ethnological findings.

A detailed map of the different ethnic groups, their geographical location and their main socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, can then be prepared in the Vietnamese language. This will be of considerable value for policymakers, and also for the national and international agencies that are now trying to adapt their development and poverty reduction programs to the needs and aspirations of diverse ethnic groups.

Moreover, once a more accurate list and map of the ethnic minorities have been prepared, it may be possible to deal more effectively with some of the policy dilemmas raised earlier in this report. For example, a revised and more comprehensive list can prepare the ground for further participatory poverty appraisals among ethnic minorities with different levels of integration within the market economy. Baseline studies

can determine the health and education status of the different groups, their patterns of income generation, their land tenure and agrarian characteristics, and other essential features of their livelihoods. It may also prove possible to determine, through longitudinal studies over a period of time, whether or not small groups have benefited from current policies to integrate them within mainstream society and the market economy, and what are their attitudes and aspirations in this regard.

A precondition for culturally sensitive approaches of this kind will be an accurate and updated list of all ethnic minorities.

INFORMATION AND RESEARCH

During the 1990s, several studies were conducted toward a better understanding of ethnic minorities and mountainous areas. To complement these, multidisciplinary and more theoretical studies in economics and related social science disciplines would be of value. These can provide a scientific background for the development of new principles and policies on ethnic minority and mountainous areas.

There is a need to improve the quality of collection, analysis, and dissemination of information related to the areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. In socioeconomic studies, for example, there has been limited use of indicators pertaining to conditions in these areas. Compulsory inclusion of such indicators from ethnic minority areas in official statistical publications at all levels would redress this deficiency.

There is a further need to extend research and documentation activities beyond the major urban centers. Vietnamese intellectuals are heavily concentrated in such cities as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. Support should be provided for the development of research and training centers at the provincial level and for the attraction of human resources to them. Both the Government and its international development partners can play an important role by extending their aid and training programs to individuals and organizations at the provincial and local levels.

OVERALL POLICY FRAMEWORK

At the present project's regional workshop, held at ADB headquarters in Manila, the Vice-Chairman of CEMMA described the various policies and programs that the Government has been implementing to eliminate hunger and reduce poverty among ethnic minorities. There are five principal policies related to, respectively, capital investment, land allocation, human resource development, market access, and a general policy regarding economic sectors. The basic aim of these policies, implemented over the past decade, has been to bridge the gap in socioeconomic development between the inhabitants of mountainous and lowland areas, and between ethnic minority and majority peoples in Viet Nam.

Although certain programs have been targeted specifically at ethnic minorities, the Government has not as yet issued a comprehensive policy on the subject of ethnic minorities and their development. Moreover, while important bodies such as CEMMA exist at the central level, and departments on ethnic minorities and mountainous areas at the provincial level, the mandate of these bodies exceeds that of ethnic minorities alone. Indeed, the relationship and the difference between the criteria for "mountainous areas" and "ethnic groups" need to be clarified.

Developing an overall policy is bound to be a complex matter. It cannot be the task of a small group of policy institutions and individuals at the central level. Rather, it needs to be considered as a long-term process with open policy discussions, involving stakeholders at different levels. Attention should also be paid to the potentially useful role of national and international development organizations in facilitating the policy dialogue.

Policy formulation also needs to be a blend of theoretical work—in order to agree on some basic principles for addressing the needs and claims of ethnic minorities—and practical work, drawing on the lessons of field experience. At the theoretical level, it can be useful to review such international instruments and guidelines as ADB's Policy on Indigenous Peoples, the

World Bank's policy instruments on the subject, and the international instruments of the United Nations and its specialized agencies. It would be useful to examine, in collaboration with ethnic minority representatives, the extent to which principles of indigenous rights can be adapted to the context of ethnic minorities in Viet Nam.

Policy also needs to be built on national realities, with particular attention to the needs and aspirations of ethnic minorities with regard to their social, economic, and cultural development. Debates apparently continue on the extent to which different ethnic minority groups seek to be integrated within mainstream Kinh culture and society. Some groups have experienced a high degree of de facto integration, others much less so. Further studies are needed to examine the extent to which approaches to ethnic minority development are governed by Kinh cultural attitudes. Studies should focus both on the attitudes of the Kinh officials who work on development and poverty reduction in ethnic minority communities, and on the attitudes of ethnic minorities toward the majority Kinh culture.

Studies of this kind will be of considerable importance for determining the overall policy framework.

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

Identification of the perceived needs of ethnic minorities will always present a major challenge. The ample consultations with ethnic minority communities carried out during the present study have pointed to the following prominent concerns.

Culture and Social Structure

In devising poverty reduction programs, it is important to understand the organizational and social structure of ethnic minority communities, and the institutions that tend to enjoy most legitimacy among their members. Until now, policies and programs have tended to target communes or individual households as the basic units for development. However, ethnic minorities tend to be organized around the traditional village. In consequence it is the village, and the village

authorities, that should be targeted for development interventions in ethnic minority areas.

Further studies are needed to examine how best to reconcile the interests of traditional village institutions, such as village assemblies, with those of state-sponsored village organizations.

It is also important to identify the role played by the more educated ethnic minority individuals, both within their own communities and in broader society, and to increase their participation in policies and programs. An elite group of ethnic minority intellectuals certainly exists, some of them holding prominent positions in national economic and political life. These persons may retain close links with their communities of origin and identify themselves very much as ethnic minorities.

Education and Language

Education and training of ethnic minorities have received considerable attention. A key aspect of policy has been the promotion of boarding schools at provincial and district levels, and "semi-boarding" schools at the commune level. This network of fully or partially subsidized boarding schools needs to be strengthened. Enrolment procedures could also be improved in order to select more capable students, for example, by examination instead of direct nomination.

Attention also needs to be given to locating schools to provide easy access by ethnic minority children. Local resources could also be tapped more effectively to improve the conditions of schools. State investment could then focus more on upgrading the quality of teaching facilities.

Literacy programs in ethnic minority areas should be further strengthened, with a particular focus on those over the age of 25 who comprise most of the labor force. These programs need also to be adapted to the social and economic circumstances of ethnic minorities.

Continued efforts should be made to preserve and promote the use of ethnic minority languages. It is advisable that ethnic minority students be taught initially in their local language at school. Officials should be encouraged to learn and use local languages in their administrative and project work. Local languages can also be promoted as the means of communication in agricultural extension and social welfare services.

Administrative reforms could improve the quality and delivery of educational and linguistic services for ethnic minorities. The current educational system is managed at the national level, with some attention being given to the educational needs of ethnic minorities. It would be useful to establish a separate agency with specific responsibility for education in ethnic minority areas. This could operate at both central and local levels, and coordinate research on key issues. Among other things, it could address the issue of adapting the educational curriculum to ethnic minority cultures.

Health Services

Health care programs for ethnic minorities need to be both more extensive and more effective. Health education, for example, should focus on the essential needs and knowledge appropriate for mountainous regions, be designed with visual aids, and be culturally sensitive.

Village health services are of key importance in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. Greater attention should be focused on the training of village health workers, preferably through the creation of a national program for the provision of these services. This should ensure that health services are extended to the more remote geographical areas and are culturally sensitive.

Policies should also maintain and promote the use of traditional medicines and treatment.

Land and Forestry Policies

The issues of access to and the best means of operating agriculture and forestry lands on the grounds of both economic efficiency and environmental sustainability, have become highly sensitive in Viet Nam over the past decade. This appears to be particularly the case in the Central Highlands, in view of the high levels of Kinh settlement and the spread of commercial crops.

There is a need to explore and promote the means by which ethnic minorities can enjoy secure access to their traditional lands and forests, where possible based on their customary laws. Existing land and forestry policies in ethnic minority areas need to be examined carefully in order to reconcile the interests and claims

of state-owned enterprises, villages, family clans, individual households, and settlers. Baseline surveys will be necessary to review existing patterns of land use and allocation, changes over time, and the impact of recent land law and policies on land tenure.

The Government has announced its aim to allocate sufficient land for cultivation to ethnic minority farmers and to secure land-use rights for the poorest people in the areas facing severest land shortages. It is important that policies and programs on land issues be carefully monitored and evaluated, in particular as they affect ethnic minorities.

State policies on sedentarization need also to be reexamined. As already recommended by the Poverty Task Force, the current focus on sedentarization might be replaced by more intensive research into agricultural options for upland farming systems, and by land titling measures that are more in line with the traditions, practices, and land-use systems of ethnic minorities.

IMPLEMENTING POVERTY REDUCTION PROJECTS FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

It has often been observed in Viet Nam that official projects and programs follow a top-down approach based on supply rather than demand factors, and ignore the real needs of local communities. The need for implementing officials to record "achievements" may prevent them from giving due attention to local and ethnic minority aspirations.

This calls for attention to the decentralization of programs and projects and to management aspects. In theory, a trend toward the decentralization of management has been in place for many years. In practice however, it has not been truly effective. The major programs and projects have remained under central control. There are various ways in which the process of decentralized management and more local participation could be accelerated.

The traditional management structure, embodied in the *gia lang* council, should be considered an official component of the management system. An official regulation should be enacted to this effect. The relationship between project management units at the central and provincial levels could also be improved.

The role of the central units could be a coordinating one, while the major administrative tasks could be carried out by the local units. In any event, more effective and sensitive mechanisms are needed to ensure local feedback, thus improving the process of decentralization and overall sector management.

It is important to strengthen the role of the development and poverty reduction institutions through their existing field presence, which may already have built up strong contacts with local communities and which may have a good understanding of local development aspirations. Particular mention should be made of the Viet Nam Bank for Agriculture and the Viet Nam Bank for the Poor. At present, the activities of these agencies are essentially restricted to granting loans. Their future roles and functions could be enhanced, in consultation with such international finance institutions as ADB and the World Bank.

Personnel issues are also of key importance. Although several policies have been adopted on this subject, there remains a shortage of qualified and adequately compensated staff. Personnel working in ethnic minority areas should be trained in the professional skills required for these local conditions, including knowledge of local languages and cultural characteristics. Training programs should also be provided for ethnic minority personnel as a long-term investment.

ROLE OF THE ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

ADB has a particularly important role to play in addressing the poverty concerns of ethnic minorities in Viet Nam. It has been pursuing the objective of poverty reduction in an appropriate and integrated manner in the Central Highlands, where its new generation of projects is largely targeted on geographical areas occupied by different ethnic minority groups. The focus of future ADB projects and assistance may eventually be broadened to include other areas with significant populations of ethnic minorities.

Much of ADB's past portfolio in Viet Nam has focused on infrastructure improvement, while recent projects and those under preparation have given relatively more attention to the social sector.

Infrastructure works may not be among the most immediate needs of ethnic minority groups, and the benefits may accrue more to wealthier sectors of society and to communities with a high degree of integration within the market economy. A balance needs to be struck between investment in such infrastructure as roads, electricity, and irrigation; and investment in safe water supply, agricultural extension, basic social services, human resource development, and institutional development including the strengthening of traditional institutions. In some cases, smaller rather than larger projects have been seen to have more positive results, especially in ethnic minority areas. It is important to place more emphasis on policy dialogue, discussing the way in which ethnic minority concerns may be addressed within the ADB country strategy and program as a whole, and on the development of partnerships at all levels.

At the present study's national workshop in Hanoi, participants identified the following nine specific areas in which ADB interventions might henceforth take place and complement a national plan of action for reducing the poverty of ethnic minorities in Viet Nam.

- (1) Technical assistance to support the development of official policy guidelines on ethnic minorities including (i) facilitating policy dialogue, (ii) comparative analysis of the policies of other countries in the region, and (iii) training and capacity building at the national level.
- (2) Assistance for institutional and capacity building at the provincial level.
- (3) Assistance for the development of a policy on access to, or ownership of, land and forestry resources.
- (4) Assistance for a policy on language and education for ethnic minorities.
- (5) Development of a social protection network for ethnic minorities.
- (6) Assistance for an appropriate institutional framework to promote the teaching of ethnic minority languages.

- (7) Support for health education of ethnic minority communities.
 - (8) Capacity building for personnel of the Viet Nam Bank for Agriculture and the Viet Nam Bank for the Poor, enabling them to extend their development operations.
 - (9) Support for the establishment of development agencies and capacity building for their staff at the local level.
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