



Farmers' voting for activity during SEDP Planning in Cao Bang, Vietnam (Photo: Helvetas/Bennett)

SUPPORTING GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY AND IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICES

In 2008, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Government of Vietnam (GoV) and Helvetas launched the “Public Service Provision Improvement Program in Agriculture and Rural Development (PS-ARD)”. The objective of the program was to contribute to improved livelihoods, increased income and poverty reduction through the provision of better services for farmers. Apart from supporting several branches of the rural sector- agricultural extension, veterinary, plant protection and irrigation services - the program promoted decentralization of local planning and commune development funds.

But what constitutes a better service? And who is going to judge if change has taken place? In a free market economy with multiple offers clients give a rating by choosing one over another provider. Since the government holds the monopoly over the rural service sector, and services are largely for free, the only way to ‘measure’ change in rural service provision is to directly ask the service users. Hence, as a novelty in Vietnam, a representative survey assessed farmers’ satisfaction with service provision at the beginning of the program and shortly before its end. The results indicate that program interventions had a very positive effect on service provision in the rural communities.

RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

In Vietnam services for agriculture and rural development (ARD) are predominantly provided by the public sector. They usually pursue a top-down approach and farmers so far have had only limited opportunity to put forward requests and evaluate the quality.

Following the principles of good governance the ARD service sector was reformed to become more client oriented, more effective and efficient. Inclusion of marginalized groups was ensured through participation particularly of the poor, ethnic minorities and women. In addition increased transparency and accountability of service providers were promoted.

All this would lead to improved farm management, better livelihoods and ultimately an increased income.

THE ISSUE: IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICES REQUIRES A "CLIENTS FIRST!" APPROACH

It was clear that a wide and sustainable effect could only be achieved through a system change that would not only permit, but enforce a client oriented approach in public service provision. In order to transform the predominantly top-down system into accountable, farmer oriented institutions it was crucial to involve farmers and farming communities systematically in planning as well as to create a feedback mechanism on service quality.

VIETNAM'S POLICIES AS PILLARS FOR PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT

In theory two crucial policies by the Government of Vietnam fostered a change in the public service sector: The national *Public Administrative Reform - PAR* and the *Grassroots Democracy Decree - GRDD*.

While PAR enhanced efficiency through leaner organizations and simplification of administrative procedures in public institutions, little attention was paid to the opinion and perception of the service users, the citizens, especially the farmers.

Similarly decentralization, promoted for more than a decade through the GRDD of 1998 (based on Vietnam's late President Ho Chi Minh's famous words: *People know, People discuss, People do and People supervise*), was constrained by complex procedures and low capacity of commune level administration. Hence the people were further denied their - in theory guaranteed - rights to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating activities of their concern and in their locality.

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

On the demand side the institutionalization of new participatory planning procedures for commune level by the GoV was fundamental, since it allows citizens to formulate their demand for agricultural services also in the future. Commune Development Funds were allocated to the commune people's committee, the lowest administrative level in Vietnam in order to 'buy' the required services as formulated in the local plans.

On the supply side of the service sector capacity development - training and introduction of i.e. modern, farmer centre teaching methods like Farmers' Field Schools, decentralized service points - enabled service providing agencies to deliver better services based on the real demand.



"Through these Paravet training classes, I have learnt to deliver better services to the local people here. My job skills have been much improved through hands-on training."

Said Ms. Truong Thi Tim, Xuan Noi commune, Tra Linh district, Cao Bang province, Vietnam (in the Veterinary Service Point)

CONCRETE OUTPUTS

- + Government officials of all 103 communes in 5 pilot districts of the two provinces increased capacities in local planning and financial management;
- + Farmers formulated their needs which were integrated into official socio-economic development plans of the local government;
- + Commune Development Funds (about 5'000 USD/year/commune) were used to implement 3'100 activities to improve livelihood conditions.
- + Service providers responded to local plans by delivering inputs, providing advice and organizing adequate technical training based on the local requirements.

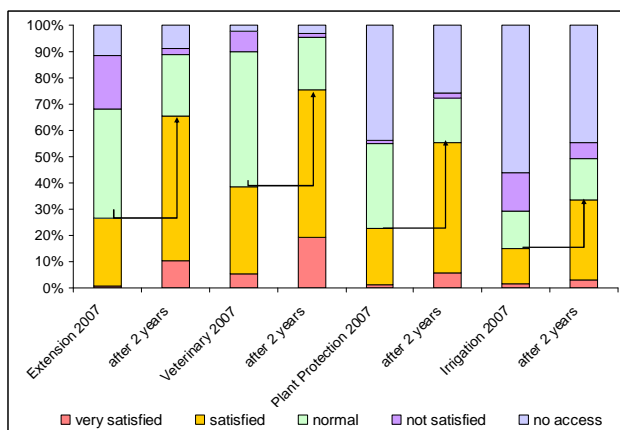
OUTCOMES AND EFFECT AT THE HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

How have the interventions changed the service provision during the last three years from a farmers' perspective? Have they become demand oriented, more inclusive and more effective?

To answer these questions at the beginning of the program interviews were held with 400 households in the concerned districts, the survey was repeated two years after assessing changes in client satisfaction with four key services - Extension, Veterinary, Plant Protection and Irrigation Management. In addition, the degree of participation in planning and in extension activities and specific quality aspects of the four services were evaluated.

Farmer Satisfaction Increased Significantly

Within less than three years farmers' access to and satisfaction with key services in agriculture and rural development increased significantly. No difference in the perception of poor and non-poor households could be observed.



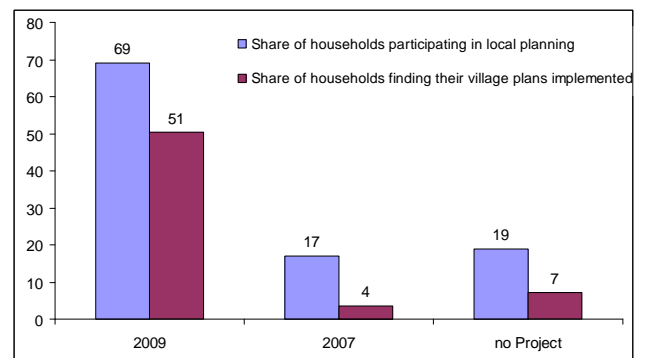
Farmers stated that compared to two years ago extension workers showed a better attitude and provided technical advice based on farmers' requests. Treatment of sick animals was more successful thanks to improved veterinary service. Farmers also acknowledged the regular pest forecasts and timely supply of agricultural inputs, such as seeds, fertilizer, pesticides etc.

Services became more inclusive

Satisfaction of the predominantly lowland dwelling ethnic groups, the Tay and Nung, increased 1.5 times. Yet general satisfaction of remote living, upland ethnic groups of the Dzao and Hmong people even tripled from only 13% in 2007 to 44% in 2009.

People Have More Decision Making Power

Participation in local meetings to develop the official commune socio-economic development plans increased from 17% to nearly 70%. About 75% of those participating in the planning stated that proposed activities had been implemented, accounting for about half of the interviewed households in contrast to only 4 % two years before. In districts without program support general participation was in 2009 still low with only 19%.



Voices of Marginalized Groups Were Heard

The difference in representation by different ethnic groups diminished. In 2007 at least 41% of the lowland living ethnic Tay and Nung farmers stated their participation in local planning meetings which was double in 2009. Within the group of Dzao and Hmong in 2007 participation was with 2% next to nothing, however over the past years it jumped up to 67% of households of upland living ethnic minorities stating participation in local planning meetings.



Farmers during a local planning meeting in Quang Lam commune, Bao Lam district, Cao Bang Province

CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATION

For the public sector it is a major challenge to measure changes in quality of their services provided, since market mechanisms like prices indicating the value of a service cannot be applied. Collecting citizens' feedback on service delivery is a valid methodology and it could be demonstrated credibly that the program interventions resulted in improved services for the farmers.

By placing the financial resources closer to the service users, promoting their participation in the planning process and fund allocation the provision of services in the agricultural sector became more demand oriented, and also more accountable. Quality of services had improved and was also more inclusive. Personal attitude had changed and staff treated farmers more as their customers.

Yet it has to be borne in mind that the opinion of service users provides mainly subjective information, a mixture of true-life experiences but still as perceived by the individual farmer. Since the perception depends largely on the expectations and the ability to compare situations considerably variations between different localities may occur. It is hence recommended to apply the methodology mainly in timelines.



“Through this Farmer Field School training, I have learnt to take care of my chicken at home. I am not scared when diseases happen. This is a good class because beside learning from teachers, we can watch and learn from the others also.”

Said Ms. Hoang Thi Lan, Tra Linh district, Cao Bang province, Vietnam

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