



A large-scale donor attempt to improve educational status of the poor and household income distribution: The experience of PEDC in Vietnam

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Primary education
Evaluating large scale projects
Synthetic estimation
Local use of national
Achievement surveys
Generating outcome measures for local
level planning

ABSTRACT

In 2003, donors combined together in Vietnam to support the provision of quality primary schooling for 226 disadvantaged districts (about a third of the country). US\$160 million was invested in infrastructure, materials and training across the 226 districts. The programme has been commended by donors and received good press inside Vietnam. Comparison of achievement surveys in 2001 and 2007 showed, however, that there had been a decline in performance in the targeted districts. This article explores various hypotheses as to how this could have happened; and in particular the increasing amounts spent by better-off households on their children's education.

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1. Introduction and background

1.1. Purpose of paper

Vietnam is a developing country, and many Vietnamese parents cannot afford for their children to attend schools. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has been implementing the Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children project (PEDC) since late 2003 to improve this situation. The project, funded by a consortium of donors through the International Development Association (IDA) and the Government of Vietnam, was due to close in December 2009, although there has been a 1-year extension. The overall objective of the PEDC project is to improve access to primary school and the quality of education for disadvantaged boys and girls. The project was targeted at 226 districts (out of 615) spread across 40 provinces (out of 61). With a total budget of US\$160 million, considerable effort has been made in terms of infrastructure, investment and training in each of those districts; and, after some initial delays, the programme has been commended by donors and received good press inside Vietnam.

It is well-recognised that substantial investments of this volume should be properly monitored and evaluated. For PEDC, a full programme of final evaluation has been carried out of the details of each of the sub-components of the project; but that evaluation has been more focused on the implementation of PEDC interventions than on outcomes. This paper, based on a report for PEDC (Carr-Hill and Lang, 2009a), focuses on the impact of the

PEDC intervention on the quality of student learning as measured by the changes in the scores in PEDC districts compared to non-PEDC districts in two achievement surveys carried out in 2001 (before the project started) and 2007 (during the project's fourth year).

1.2. Background

1.2.1. Demography and economy

Vietnam is richly endowed with human and natural resources but has been constrained in its development by almost a century of colonialism and 30 years of devastating war. The population numbered about 76 million and the population growth rate had been 1.7% during the 1990s. Whilst the population grew to c.86 million in 2006, there has been a sharp decline in the birth rate. About a third of the population was under 16 although this proportion is falling. As a result of partially successful policies of relocating populations from Ho Chi Minh and other Southern cities to rural areas, the urban population remained around 20% until 1995 but by 2006, with the inevitable rural-urban drift, had grown to about 25% (General Statistical Office, 2009). There are more than 50 minority ethnic groups (comprising about 9 million people) with most living in the mountainous areas of the central plateau and in the northern part of the country. GDP has more than doubled in the last decade with an annual growth rate since 2000 averaging around 7.0%, while the proportion of poor households in Vietnam has significantly decreased from 58% in 1993 to 13% in 2007 (General Statistical Office, 2010).

1.2.2. Structure and overall policies

The government's primary political goal is economic growth and development through transition to a market economy. By the

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year 2000, there was substantial decentralisation, and a state-managed market economy had been established. The number of provinces has increased over time partly because of population increases, but partly also because of political pressure: thus in 2001 there were 61 provinces and by 2009, there were 66. There are 615 districts with an average population of 130,000 with wide variations between cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh and the rural areas. Each Ministry is represented at both provincial and district levels, but provinces have some tax-raising powers.

1.3. Education

Education and the economy are viewed as linked in Vietnam and consequently a high priority is placed on education. The literacy rate at the last count was said to be 91% for all persons over the age of 10-years. Only 9.8% of those over 5 years of age had never attended school.

1.3.1. Primary education

There are 5 years of primary school which are compulsory and children begin school in September in the calendar year in which they become six. After primary school, there are 4 years of lower secondary school and 3 years of upper secondary school. The survival rate in primary school was 68% at the end of the 1990s and the transition rate from Grade 5 primary to lower secondary school was 98%. School hours are in principle longer than in many other countries; at primary level, however, most children attend what is called 'Half-Day-Schooling' lasting about 4 hours. Education is overwhelmingly state provided, although there are a few semi-state schools where the government provides the facilities, but parents meet the operating costs

There are nearly 15,000 primary schools which enrolled over 10 million pupils with about 1.9 million in Grade 5 in 2000, although this had declined substantially with the declining birth rate to under 7 million by 2007. In 1999, the net enrolment ratio for primary school was 88.5% and this had increased to 96% by 2007 although these averages mask large differences between the cities and some remote mountainous areas. Vietnam is seen as being on track for the EFA goals. The allotment of the government's budget to education was 17.4% in 1998. This was the equivalent of 3.5% of GDP. Of the MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) budget, 36.4% went to primary education. About 90% of the total primary education is paid for from the local budget. There are 61 provinces and it is money levied at the provincial and school levels that finances much of education. Primary schools (as well as lower secondary schools) are managed by districts and communes.

Primary school teachers are paid about US\$50 a month but in some schools, are given extra allowances, so that their salary can reach US\$130. This is low compared with the teacher salaries in several other Asian countries. Many teachers teach extra classes or second shifts or have other forms of employment in order to supplement their incomes. In 1999, some 41% of primary teachers had not received the full pre-service teacher training of 2 years after graduation from secondary school. 47% of all primary teachers had received the 'standard' teacher training consisting of 12 years of general education and 2 years of pre-service teacher training. The remaining 12% of teachers had 12 years of general education and three or more years of pre-service teacher training. The situation had improved by 2007 (see Table 1B).

The National Institute for Educational Sciences (NIESAC), an institute within the Ministry of Education, developed a new curriculum and as from 2001 this was gradually introduced into the schools. In 2000, the average number of hours of instruction per day for most pupils was 4 hours. With 33 weeks per year this only allowed 660 hours of instruction per year, low compared to

other countries. The Grade 5 primary school curriculum includes the following: Vietnamese language, mathematics, moral education, nature and society, technology/crafts, health education, physical education, music, and art. In some schools, pupils have an option to study informatics and English.

1.3.2. Geographical variations

Although the central Ministry sets the overall policy for primary education, including the development of a new curriculum, it is the provincial offices (and sometimes district offices) that control the allocation of teachers and facilities to schools. There is considerable variation in school and classroom resources not only among schools but also among provinces. For the purposes of illustration, comparisons are made for 2001 and 2007 between the Red River Delta (the 'wealthiest' region) and North West (the 'poorest' region) based on the schools sampled in the two achievement surveys.

In 2001, the percent of ethnic minorities varied between 0 and 37%, and the percent of students without drinking water between 24 and 55%; the pupil: teacher ratios were higher in the wealthier region than in the poorer region (see Table 1A).

The contrasts between 'wealthiest' and 'poorest' regions in 2007 are shown in Table 1B. It can be seen that there are still substantial differences between the two regions in the expected direction: 2 vs 60% of poor communes, an average distance from home to school of 4 vs 55 km, 1 vs 92% ethnic minorities and average fees of US\$16 vs US\$2.5. It is clear that the variations did not diminish between 2001 and 2007.

1.4. Primary education for disadvantaged children

1.4.1. Project concept

The PEDC project defined disadvantage broadly as school-aged children who are not enrolled or are at risk of not completing their primary education; children who attend schools that do not meet fundamental quality standards; and disabled children or children from other highly vulnerable groups, such as street or migrant children or girls in certain ethnic minority areas. The PEDC project was targeted at districts rather than provinces because, typically, the provincial capital and its surrounding district(s) will be wealthier than the remote and rural areas in the same provinces (see World Bank, Targeted Budget Support, 2005).

Table 1A

Variations in school and teacher characteristics across Vietnam using 2001 survey data ($N = 72,580$ students).

| Region | N students | Pupil teacher ratio | % ethnic minorities | % sites drinking water |
|-----------------|------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Red River Delta | 10,753 | 25.9 | 0 | 24 |
| Northwest | 3546 | 18.5 | 37 | 55 |
| Total | 72,580 | 25.7 | 11 | 36 |

Table 1B

Variations in school and teacher characteristics across Vietnam: 2007 using DFA database for PAG survey sample schools (N of schools in 2007 survey = 3950; means and percentages as specified in note to table).

| Region | N schools | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I |
|-----------------|-----------|----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Red River Delta | 509 | 2 | 257 | 4.1 | 0.9 | 1.53 | 20.8 | 55.3 | 10.6 | 90.0 |
| North West | 270 | 60 | 37 | 55.0 | 91.8 | 1.37 | 15.3 | 39.0 | 3.9 | 57.4 |
| Total | 3950 | 25 | 154 | 18.8 | 34.2 | 1.45 | 18.8 | 34.3 | 6.0 | 70.1 |

A: % poor commune; B: average fees; C: average distance (km); D: % ethnic minorities; E: teacher classroom ratios; F: pupil classroom ratios; G: % qualifications; H: % without blackboards; I: % female teachers.

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