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Overview
Cantho University-Michigan State University
Integrating School Reform with Community Development in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam

The purpose of the project is to reduce poverty (including child malnutrition) in economically poor villages in rural sites in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam using resource management practices that promote environmentally sustainable development. The strategy is to support households in a variety of ways to diversify sources of family income. Schools are integrated into this process through school-based community development projects that demonstrate innovative practices that are then diffused into communities in a variety of ways.

The project began in May 2001. The following organizations support its work: Chevron Vietnam, the Shell Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Unocal Foundation, and the U.S Ambassador's fund (Vietnam).

The project is being implemented in three villages in Hoa An (a remote rural site about 40 kilometers south of Cantho City in Hau Giang Province). There are approximately 7,000 households (approximately 35,000 inhabitants) in these villages. Hau Giang is the poorest province in the Mekong Delta and Hoa An is the poorest site in this province. Natural resource problems such as acid sulfate soil, overuse of fertilizer and pesticides and poor surface water quality affect rice production and the ability to generate additional forms of household income. These problems affect 85% of the villages in the Mekong Delta, so results can have a broad impact.

The project currently works in six schools in these sites (three primary and three lower secondary schools). Sixty teachers and twelve principals and vice principals participate. All subject areas are included.

Community Development. The community development component uses a number of strategies to improve household income including

- Aquaculture (fish raising)
- Animal husbandry (raising pigs, goats and other animals for market)
- Organic and naturally growing vegetable gardens to reduce the need to purchase vegetables from the market
- Integrated Pest Management (IPM) for growing rice, which uses the natural cycle of pests to reduce the need for chemical pesticides
- Composting for use in growing vegetables
- Biogas which uses the waste from pigs is used to produce methane gas for household fuel consumption
- Integrated farming systems models that combine several components (e.g., rice-fish and pig-biogas-fish raising)

Eight full-time specialists work with villagers. Community organizations such as Women's Unions, Farmers' Unions and Veterans' Unions in each village work closely with community development specialists. Working farm models, demonstration projects, micro-credit programs for individual household projects, micro-credit projects for very poor farmers, and support for school-initiated projects are just some of the ways these strategies are implemented.

A household survey conducted near the end of Phase 1 (2004) showed that household income improved 27.7% compared with the baseline survey.

School Improvement. Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training is now promoting more active learning in Vietnamese classrooms. The task is substantial given the centralized nature of the educational system, a packed curriculum that encourages a focus on content coverage and factual recall, a high-stakes testing system at each level of schooling, parental concern that students do well on such tests, a lack of experience and understanding by teachers of more active learning methods, and a supervisory system that emphasizes correction rather than support.

In each school the project helps teachers implement concepts through active learning strategies in the classroom, learning on the school grounds (including school gardens), and visits to community development projects. Teachers are trained in using locally developed teaching aids. In addition to regularly held participatory workshops, the project uses an innovative support system to help teachers change their practice. This involves regular classroom observations and feedback from CTU faculty in different disciplines and on-going assistance from a "support team" teacher in each school who is freed from nearly all teaching responsibilities to focus specifically on helping teachers change their practice.

As a result outcome studies show:

- Students do better in project classes than students in non-project classes. Outcomes for end-of-semester tests are statistically significant at the .05 to .01 levels, as reported at the end of Phase 1 (February 2005). A cohort of lower secondary students who had only project classes grades 7-9 did significantly better on the 9th grade exam than students in non-project classes.

- Students develop critical thinking skills and the ability to speak and present arguments in front of adults
- Students like project classes more than classes that do not use this method.
- Teachers like this new approach better than traditional teaching. In the process of using active learning, they have begun to change their views on where knowledge comes from. Their sense of professionalism has increased as a result of this project.
- Parental support for project classes is very strong. They routinely request that their children be placed in project classrooms.
- Principals have increased their understanding of effective teaching practices, learned how to provide support for teachers when they use the school grounds for learning, and have improved their relationships with communities.
- Closer connections have developed between the school and higher administrative organizations (district and provincial offices of education) in support of the active learning approaches used in project classrooms.
- CTU faculty have learned valuable lessons in how to provide supportive feedback to teachers on content and pedagogy. They also use experiences from working in schools in their CTU classes in training prospective teachers (i.e., effective classroom management practices, how to develop relevant teaching aids using local materials, how to apply the content to real life). They have also developed relationships with classroom teachers that will extend beyond the life of the project.

In terms of teacher change, results showed that project strategies led to an increase of 52% in the use of active learning strategies and a decrease of 23% in more traditional forms of teaching by participants in the project.

Linking Schools to Community Development. While active learning methods help students to see the relevance of what they are studying and illustrate how schools can use the community as a resource to improve student learning, the major objective of this project is to improve household income in very poor rural areas. As a result, this project also involves schools in community development. Given curricular constraints the project uses summer months for activities that connect schools to communities.

Schools **demonstrate** innovative practices during the summer (organic gardens, integrated pest management projects for growing rice, composting practices, and strategies to reduce the incidence of dengue fever, among others). Students, teachers and community members participate in these activities. Training activities focus on the concepts underlying each area. Parents learn about student accomplishments through visits, presentations and competitions where students show what they have learned about plants, the cycle of rice growing and pest management, ways of using locally available organic matter combined with new bacteria discovered at Cantho University to create rich compost in a short time, and ways to control mosquitoes that carry dengue. Household members are then **directly** recruited to participate in the community development component. Project community development workers visit such households to answer specific technical questions and provide the support needed to make the projects a success. Community organizations play a key role in recruiting individual farmers and alerting development workers to families with problems that require special attention.

Demonstration effects also lead to **diffusion** to households through community organizations participating in the project. In Hoa An, for example, after a student presentation on what they accomplished and the lessons they had learned, the Women's Union decided to make organic gardens a requirement of members if they wanted to borrow funds from their credit union. With support from the community development side of the project, over 5,500 household organic gardens are now in evidence in this site (out of 7,000 households).

Student clubs are created to carry on summer activities during the academic year (organic gardens and controlling dengue fever). The project works with teachers to integrate concepts from these areas into the lessons.

Market access and state loans. A major emphasis is underway to improve market access to products, beginning with vegetables. Also as farmers improve their income, they are now becoming qualified for state loans. These along with continued project technical support promises to provide the basis for sustained income improvement.

Challenges. Such a project faces a number of challenges and has developed a number of lessons regarding the limited but important role schools can play in community development.

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Phung Thi Nguyet-Hong, Cantho University: hong_ptn@ctu.edu.vn
 Dr. Christopher Wheeler, Michigan State University: cwheeler@msu.edu