

On her watch

Phin's path to becoming a transport guru was mapped out after she was awarded a scholarship in 1970 to study Transport Economics at Dresden Transport University. That scholarship began a life-long relationship with Germany and kept her safe from the American war that was affecting the lives of so many people in Hanoi.

Returning in 1976 she immediately took a job as a researcher in what was the forerunner to the TDSI. Phin worked there until 1987, when she again returned to Germany to complete a PhD in Transport Economics.

Phin is a busy mother of two and has held the post of Deputy Director at the TDSI since 1994. As well as being the former chairwoman of the Scientific Technology Committee at TDSI (from 1996-2006), a serving member of the Scientific Technology Committee of the Ministry of Transport and member of the city's Urban Planning Committee, she still finds time to manage over 100 people and has directed several DFID-funded SEACAP projects.

However, she is well aware of the problems involved in developing sustainable transportation in a country such as Vietnam with limited resources, cultural differences and extreme environmental conditions.

More than fifteen years ago, Phin, a keen traveller, visited the north-east region of Vietnam, including Cao Bang province, to investigate the state of transportation in the area. What she found both saddened and motivated her.

Bao Lac

"There were no access roads to most of the communes and very difficult access to the rest of the communes in the rainy season. The area was completely cut off from the outside world", she said from her French colonial era office in the heart of Hanoi. "Generations of villagers, from the young to the old, couldn't read or write. The school was too far away for people to walk to. Everyone in the area was desperately poor. Seventeen and eighteen year-olds who had never received any education already had children of their own."

Thanks to Government-led development initiatives on poverty reduction, most communes in Bao Lac now have schools and access roads. "It's simple really. Without transportation or decent roads, people cannot go to school, food markets, health centres or tend anything other than a small area of crops," she said. "A lack of transportation is the biggest obstacle to poverty alleviation in Vietnam's rural areas."



Phin, whose two children are professionals currently working and studying in Germany, explained that access roads to all communes in Vietnam must be built by 2010. That is no easy task. But partnerships with donor-funded programmes like SEACAP are proving a significant factor in helping the Government of Vietnam achieve this target.

SEACAP conducts research, raises awareness and works with stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions to rural transportation problems.

“SEACAP really understand the problems that we face in Vietnam. The research is very good for us to use and provides a great foundation on which we can base transport and development policy,” she said.

Phin pointed to an example of a SEACAP project that produced concrete results while bringing local communities to the table.

The initiative, which ran from September 2004 to the end of 2005, called for Vietnamese consultants to digitise and update maps of many of Vietnam’s provinces. Roads, routes, rail, rivers, streams, dykes, borders, provincial centres, district centres and commune centres were all checked and uploaded onto the Ministry of Transport website.

“SEACAP is different to other assistance programmes because they understand that working with local people and assessing skills is crucial for success,” she said.

Effective partnerships

Another SEACAP project looked at how resources for rural transportation in Vietnam could be used more efficiently. TDSI assessed Institutional, Incentive and Capacity (IIC) changes needed for a ‘sector-wide’ approach. The project team were particularly keen to establish how effectively the commune, and provincial and central-level government units, such as the Ministry of Transport, used resources and ran their rural transportation programmes.

Meetings about the findings of the report have been held to encourage stakeholders to discuss recommendations and embrace a more open way of working.

“Through our partnership, we’ve improved the capacity of Vietnamese officials at district level, identified weaknesses and provided solutions to address them,” Phin said.

Yet a third key SEACAP project, to undertake a time and distance study in Vietnam, involved gathering demographic information from household surveys in three provinces selected for the study - one mountainous area, one river delta and another on the plains. The objective was to ascertain the amount of time and the length of distance that commune dwellers needed to travel between key areas. Information was also compiled about road conditions, the impact of bad weather, types of transportation and ease of travel between other hamlets, communes, schools, hospitals and districts.

The TDSI team, over half of whom were women, found that most of the people surveyed did not measure time in minutes, hours or days. Being crop farmers, their definition of time centred around the harvest. Responses to questions on time or distance were often met with “half a day,” or “the position of the sun”.

A current continuing project is aimed at raising awareness about Vietnam's Rural Transportation Strategy (RTS) among stakeholders nationwide. Central and provincial agencies, donors and NGOs attended seminars to provide feedback on the Strategy. The success of the second phase will be measured against how many stakeholders take up RTS recommendations.

Although she will call it a day at the Ministry after reaching the mandatory retirement age of 55, Phin is still inspired by her work and is keen to continue what she started over three decades ago.

"I want to use my experience to help others. I plan to keep myself busy by working as a consultant," she said. "I am happy when I look back over my career. I have worked with many international partners and can see progress in a lot of the provinces I visited when I first started."