

Hooked on Hanoi

A Hanoian honeymoon in 1999 for Simon and wife Hilary proved to be more than a holiday in an exotic locale and a kick start to married life. It heralded the beginning of a connection that would see the couple return three years later to raise a young family and allow Simon to embark on his biggest professional challenge to date.

No stranger to developing countries, Simon has lived and worked in Botswana, Uganda, Kenya and Zambia. Beginning his career with DFID in 1998, he is now a highly regarded member of the Hanoi development community for his work overseeing the SEACAP programme.

Rural Vietnam has 150,000 km of rural roads. But transport networks in these areas have to compete with bigger infrastructure projects for funding. Vietnam is rare in its attention to its rural network but highways will still often secure financing while improvement of rural roads is put on the backburner.

“If you put a local road in Vietnam it will have a definite impact on poverty alleviation. If people can get to market they can make money. It’s simple,” said Simon who has a PhD in renewable energy from Reading University.

This is what inspired Simon and DFID’s Peter O’Neill Deputy Head of DFID’s Central Research Department to set up SEACAP, which has a multi-million pound budget for technical research projects in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and is increasingly influencing capital investments of many hundreds of millions of pounds.

Like any successful relationship, working in Vietnam requires communication, knowledge and understanding, the building blocks of trust. It is Simon’s cheerful, yet practical outlook that has allowed him and his team to keep their eyes on the prize.

During his five years in Vietnam, Simon has guided the SEACAP initiative and a complex network of stakeholders to effectively respond to the priorities of the Vietnam Government’s Ministry of Transport (MoT).

“In Vietnam nothing actually works until someone Vietnamese has done it. As a foreigner you have to work very hard for credibility,” Simon explains. “Donors have caused a lot of problems around the world by telling other people that their way is the right way to do things.”

Scratching the surface

Between 2001 and 2006, the MoT Rural Transport Project 2 provided access roads for 40 of the country’s 59 provinces. As Vietnam’s building standards mirrored those from the former Eastern Block, most of these road surfaces were gravel.

It soon became evident that gravel roads deteriorate quickly due to heavy rainfall and severe water flows. Work that had been started to tackle the problems facing rural roads became coordinated under SEACAP.

“The cost of maintaining roads would often greatly exceed the cost of building. The MoT requested that research be carried out on alternative surfaces,” Simon says. Answering the ministry’s call, SEACAP rolled out Rural Road Surfacing Research (RRSR) and the *Rural Road Gravel Assessment Programme (RRGAP)*.

The RRGAP – carried out in 16 provinces - found real problems with the performance of 766 gravel road sites. Material quality, availability, climate, terrain, drainage and maintenance were all highlighted as problem areas. While a massive 58% of the roads suffered from unsustainable degradation, a further 28% that were losing the surfacing material at twice the sustainable rate.

The RRSR looked to find affordable and sustainable road surfacing solutions that promote local resources. This seems like a straightforward, common-sense approach. But for many, giving up old practices is never straightforward.

“In Vietnam each of the 64 provinces are responsible for their own road networks. They receive funding from the central government but they make their own decisions,” said the Englishman. “This can be problematic as each province has to be convinced of the merits of SEACAP findings before they put them into use. There is a lot of variability. Hence the need for SEACAP to work directly in each of the provinces so that the solutions are developed together”

The first of the Rural Road Surfacing Trials were undertaken in the Mekong Delta and the Central Coast. The second phase was conducted in the Central Highlands, Red River Delta and Northern Highlands. By the time it was finished in June of 2006, over 140 km in trial roads were built. Then 75 sections were selected for performance and maintenance cost assessments.

Thinking outside the box

Surveyors reviewed existing road options and researched alternatives for surfacing and paving. A focus was placed on using inventive and locally found materials such as clay and concrete bricks, as well as soil stabilization with lime for a more sustainable approach. “Throughout the work, our teams would encourage people to think differently about road-building,” said Simon.

One of the fundamental principles of SEACAP is to take research findings into use. To achieve this SEACAP is working with all the sector stakeholders to ensure the results of the RRSR will be incorporated into the MoT National Standards. “We felt it important to encourage people to adopt an analytical

approach, asking 'Why are we doing what we are doing?', 'Who and how are people going to benefit?'" says Simon.

SEACAP also managed to incorporate other areas of research aside from transportation. For example, SEACAP surveyors distributed HIV awareness packs to over 10,000 people in remote areas where they were working.

"It took six months to get approval to distribute the packs!," Simon said.

Maintaining a flexible approach has been fundamental to the programme's success. "At times we have been criticised for moving away from the pure research focus. Being opportunistic and integrating work in other areas such as distributing the HIV packs is obviously hugely beneficial," said Simon.

Looking back over SEACAP, Simon points to Rural Transport Project 3 (RT3) and the country's technical guidelines which have incorporated programme findings.

Simon is set to leave Vietnam for a new post in Nepal. He hopes the window of opportunity left by a truce between Maoists and the government will allow him to extend the SEACAP work in the kingdom. "I'll miss Vietnam though and working in a place where everyday you can see people's lives getting better. In some countries just stopping things from getting worse is an achievement in itself."

"Vietnam will succeed because it fundamentally believes in itself. When you get over 80,000,000 people working together you can do unbelievable things."