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SmartLessons

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Pathways to Development Empowering Local Women to Build a More Equitable Future in Vietnam

Vietnam's economic emergence is perhaps best experienced along its rural roads: over 175,000 kilometers of pavement, rubble, and dirt track extend to two-thirds of the country's population, including nearly all of the poorest people, who live among its productive farms, lush forests, and meandering river valleys. In recent years, road investments in Vietnam's rural areas have improved socioeconomic development and have promoted gender equity, social participation, improved school attendance, and more inclusive health services to impoverished regions. However, all but a few hundred communes remain off-grid, and infrastructural roadblocks and bureaucratic potholes have delayed the goal of a fully integrated road system. The World Bank's Third Rural Transport Project (RTP3) supported a win-win solution: employing ethnic minority women to sustainably manage road maintenance through an innovative participatory approach to local development. This SmartLesson describes the experience of improving the roads—and women's lives—in rural Vietnam.

Background

The RTP3 identified missing links that excluded many rural Vietnamese communities from the country's remarkable development successes (See Box 1). The project prioritized road maintenance and local infrastructure management ahead of new construction projects, and it collaborated with government institutions to address steep increases in travel

costs per kilometer across crumbling rural roads. Project staff identified barriers along the route to more accessible road networks, including a lack of incentives for local bureaucracies to regularly maintain rural roads in remote areas—leading to deteriorating roads in places that are desperate for improved access to goods, services, and social networks.

Box 1: Stated Objective of the Third Rural Transport Program

This program directly contributes to the poverty reduction and economic growth objectives set out in the 2002 Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy and the government's last five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) for 2001–2005. It is also consistent with the draft SEDP for 2006–2010, which states the priorities of the rural transport sector to be: the completion of basic access, the upgrading of access quality, and an increase in maintenance budgets. The program will continue the task of completing access to all communes in Vietnam, and as such will contribute directly to the Country Assistance Strategy objective of ensuring equitable growth in Vietnam.

The project also recognizes that the nature of the rural transport sector is shifting from new construction to upgrading, maintenance, and management of the network. The focus on governance of the sector—in particular the role of the decentralized provincial governments, is a reflection of this shift. Work to support provincial planning and implementation capacity will directly contribute to the CAS objective of governance and administrative reform in Vietnam.



A construction crew upgrades the road between Lai Chau and Lao Cai towns, northern Vietnam.

Photo by Trần Thị Hoa, 2002

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Government support, adequate financing, and community participation are among the most critical components for success.

Local interest in overseeing road maintenance is necessary, but not sufficient, to ensuring lasting transportation links from urban to rural areas. It is also important to have support from governmental institutions, such as the Provincial Department of Finance, to effectively administer road maintenance. Inadequate finance remains a challenge: the department's funding makes up less than 5 percent of the total provincial expenditure on roads, which is not sufficient to cover the entire road network.

As a result, the government's infrastructure strategy has often been directed to major highways and transshipment routes at the expense of rural roads. These policy issues must be addressed before an integrated rural transport system can move ahead.

At present, the rural roads network is largely managed by Vietnam's provincial districts and communes; they receive a small allocation from the provincial budget, which is often supplemented through district and commune revenue generation. Commune-arranged "labor days" are an intermediary way to ensure that byways are marginally open to traffic—a pretty novel solution to inadequate maintenance. But, clearly, more can be done.

Lesson 2: Solutions can come from unexpected sources.

The RTP3 task team's investigation showed that up to a third of the population in the Northern Uplands provinces would be expected to contribute up to 10 percent of their total annual household expenditure to ensure safe passage along local roads—too much for most to afford. Furthermore, even when adequate resources are made available for maintenance, contractors have sometimes been unwilling to work in inaccessible regions for fear of mudslides during the rainy season.

The situation appeared intractable—the political and economic realities insurmountable. But a solution was at hand: in speaking with the project team, many women from ethnic minority communities across Vietnam expressed their interest in volunteering to participate as stewards of their local roads!

The World Bank's task team soon promoted the idea of having ethnic women work as road maintenance crews. Consequently the Bank sent out calls for just-in-time proposals under the Gender Action Plan to address gender gaps to achieve effective, inclusive development.

The team secured funds to pilot an initiative across four communes in Bac Ha District in Lao Cai Province. The project sought to: 1) increase awareness of the need for rural-road maintenance among the ethnic groups; 2) promote a sustainable road-maintenance culture within the community; 3) improve local livelihoods by providing additional off-season jobs for the ethnic minority women in Vietnam; and 4) provide training to ethnic groups in road maintenance skills.

A construction crew upgrades the road between Lai Chau and Lao Cai towns, northern Vietnam. (Photo by Trần Thị Hoa, 2002)

Box 2: Learning by Doing

Staff from the Provincial Department of Transport spearheaded the critically important road maintenance training programs to build capacity of their new employees. Resources for this innovative program included handbooks and onsite experiential modules.

The course followed a demand-driven approach built on the willingness and commitment of ethnic minority women to be guardians of their local community's transportation networks. Representatives from the following wide range of organizations and institutions participated in the training:

- Office of Urban and Infrastructure Management
- District Women's Union
- Provincial Women's Union
- Project steering committees from each of four communes (commune leaders, chairwomen of women's union, cadastral staff)
- Village heads, heads of village women's union (which is a sub-unit of the women's union at the village level), deputy village heads, and traditional leaders

An important challenge was language: Vietnam's richly diverse linguistic tapestry often prevented effective communication. Many, if not most, rural women did not speak the Vietnamese language. The Women's Union cooperated with the Transportation Department to provide training, combined with on-the-job practice, for rural women whose previous work experience was mainly related to shifting cultivation and swidden agriculture. In addition to an overview of the project's goals and approaches, hands-on engagement provided an effective way to transfer knowledge.

“Women like to do this work; they are competing to join. They think that maintaining the road makes the roads nicer and more convenient for transporting commodities to develop the household economy. During this time of the year, it often rains, so maintaining the roads during this time is good.”

— Phung Pha Sui, an ethnic woman trainee

Lesson 3: Take advantage of all the resources available.

A novel Rural Transport Project soon began to take shape. A pilot effort trained local ethnic minority women in engineering and road-building practices and provided formal employment opportunities for those with responsibility for specific sections near their communities. The Lao Cai Provincial Women’s Union—with its deep roots in the community and solid reputation at the district, commune, and village levels—acted as a key implementing agency for the project. The Women’s Union managed and monitored the recruitment of women in Ban Lien, Nam Mon, Nam Tri, and Hoang Thu Pho villages, and provided them with training and equipment (See Box 2).

More than 1,500 ethnic minority women from four communes were trained as rural transportation managers, and many more eagerly await the opportunity. Following the training courses, women became road maintenance workers for the Provincial Women’s Union, and each earned a salary of about 100,000 Vietnamese dong (D) a day (about \$4.80) for each section of road completed. To ensure high-quality work, the BacHa District Office of Urban and Infrastructure Management supervised and monitored work along the road sections. Community supervisors assisted, and Provincial Department of Transport staff provided technical guidance.

Across the road networks, 10–30 women are responsible for maintaining a 1–2-kilometer section for three months. Each

Table 1: Roads Maintained under the Project

Road	Location	Length (in km)
Nam Mon commune	Nam Mon — Coc Ly road link	n/a
Nam Det commune	Nam Tri — Nam Det road link	8
Hoang Thu Pho commune	Ban Pho — Hoang Thu Pho road link	10
Ban Lien commune	Road leading to Ban Lien	14.5
Ban Pho Quan Din commune	n/a	12

“Dig soil . . . Take out the grass . . . Trim the bushes . . . Clear sewers . . . [this] is a new job for us who previously only knew how to cultivate. Although we are sometimes tired, the work is more satisfying than working in the fields alone. After maintenance, the road will be much safer for villagers heading to the market, and more convenient for teachers going to schools.”

— an ethnic female road worker

Box 3: A Woman’s Day on the Job

“At 7:00 a.m., I am eating, with my team, a tasty breakfast—Pho, a Vietnamese noodle soup. The World Bank team is ably led by our TTL, Phuong Thi Minh Tran, who, having been on the sleeper many times before, wisely turned in the earliest of us. We are assisted by Sombath Southivong, the Senior Transport Specialist from the World Bank office in [Lao People’s Democratic Republic], who brings with him the [Lao] innovation and experience. Breakfast finished, we leave to meet with the provincial transport department to learn more about their innovative program, hiring women’s groups to manage and maintain select road lengths.

“In no time it is 7 p.m. and we return to the station, exchanging each other’s learning experiences, talking about the day’s events, the field visits, and the transport department’s meetings in those reinforced concrete buildings that always take on a sense of anonymity. . . . We will put it into practice tomorrow at our next regional transport department meeting.”

Mission Diary—Tour of Rural Road Innovations in Vietnam

Submitted by Peter O’Neill

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person who participates in daily maintenance is guaranteed D 100,000. A typical time frame for maintenance includes 5–10 days per month of active work, depending on the maintenance workload and requirements for different road sections.

Beginning at sunrise, women from Hmong, Tay, and Dao ethnic communities walk 10 kilometers, carrying shovels and hoes to their workplace—for many, the first formal employment opportunity of their lives. They work all day clearing debris, repairing broken sections, filling potholes, grading the surface, improving drainage systems, and cleaning side ditches. Together, they share the work—enlivened by stories and a common bond (See Box 3). Approximately 51 kilometers of roads were maintained under the pilot initiative, as shown in Table 1.

Lesson 4: It is important to solidify the project’s benefits.

The pilot project has achieved significant development successes, while promoting employment and improving conditions for the women and their families. Stakeholder consultations undertaken by the task team also identified several specific advantages relating to the initiative:

- Road maintenance is more efficiently managed by local people, who have clear incentives to promote quality and limit corruption.
- Project funds provide direct benefits to communities and rural women, rather than being spent on leisure activities, including alcohol consumption or gambling.
- Improved awareness of the critical importance of road maintenance among local communities creates trust and accountability across villages and builds capacity for co-operation.

- As a result of increased economic power and social status, women have achieved a greater voice in community decision making and a more visible role in managing affairs at the household level.
- Participation of women in road maintenance contributes to enhanced social cohesion among members of local women's unions and neighborhoods, which in turn strengthens mutual cooperation and social capital endowments in rural areas.

“Regarding efficiency, I think—for the first time—women have started to realize that maintenance is necessary for commuting, and serves the local communities that they live in”

— Tran Thi Khanh, Vice President of Lao Cai Women's Union

Lesson 5: Be open to local solutions to local problems.

The D 100,000 a day per person that local maintenance groups received for each section of road completed presented a challenge: the supply of willing workers outweighed demand. Fortunately, citizens from Nam Mon, Nam Det, Hoang Thu Pho, and Ban Lien provided an organic solution: steering committees rotated available positions among all women living in targeted communes. This rotation allowed everyone to participate, resulted in greater buy-in from the communities, and created an environment of trust and mutual support.

Lesson 6: Benefits can come in surprising combinations!

People don't necessarily associate rural road maintenance with gender-based social inclusion! Yet this project brought those two concepts together—with outstanding results. We learned that involving local ethnic women in rural road maintenance can:

- Enhance the role of women in communities where husbands' decision making is still dominant, and where income-generating opportunities are limited to the off-farm season.
- Improve awareness of value added by maintaining rural roads, which in turn indirectly supports gender equity through access to human development resources that often are not available in remote and relatively inaccessible areas.

Conclusion

Innovation is key to the program's success. For instance, RTP3 demonstrates that productivity, profitability, and accountability in rural networks management in Vietnam can be enhanced using an innovative approach to educating and collaborating with rural ethnic women—creating social benefits and increasing the stock of social capital that can be beneficial to other development projects. The pilot training program also established an innovative platform for quantitatively monitoring tangible outcomes of road maintenance at the household level among diverse ethnic minority groups.

The World Bank's task team recently approached Vietnam's Project Management Unit to incorporate a cooperative co-management approach into RTP3 to address remaining logistical problems to scale up current efforts to local infrastructure development. With the closing of RTP3, we hope the government will adopt a number of lessons learned from this experience and promote participation of ethnic minorities in general and women in particular into future road-development projects. Connecting everyone through better maintained road networks will pave the way to a smoother future.



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